COUNTRY COMFORT

Resilience and the power of the collective are helping rural India look up

CLEAN BREAK
Mission Garima makes life better for Mumbai’s sanitation workers

INTERVIEW
Horizons speaks to Magsaysay award winner Anshu Gupta

FLOATING FEELING
Solar-powered ‘lake huts’ get Manipur fishing community into tourism
Rural India deserves a break. The so-called ‘other India’ is quite certainly the real India — if such a classification is to be made — and it is coping better than its urban counterpart in these difficult times, be it with the Covid-19 outbreak or on the economic front.

Our cover story examines why community organisations, primarily women-led self-help groups, are so vital in bringing meaningful social development to the doorsteps of villagers eager for the opportunity to get ahead, and it explains how agriculture and efforts allied to it are increasing the incomes of farmers yearning to go beyond cropping and pull in extra money. Professor Bhaskar Vira from Cambridge University weighs in with what it will take for transformative change to be effected in the lives of rural communities.

The special report in this edition of Horizons sheds light on the conditions that Mumbai’s conservancy workers slog away in, and how a Tata Trusts project is trying to ease their woes. Illuminating what it means to be part of this hidden army — literally so when they labour in underground sewers — is a set of searing images shot by acclaimed photojournalist Sudharak Olwe, who brings alive the stories of these invisible souls.

Our collection of feature stories has been gathered from near and far: a programme that is an enabler for West Bengal’s much-maligned and marginalised Kheria Sabar tribal community; the ‘Annapurna Central Kitchens’ project to provide nutritious food to school-going children from some of Maharashtra’s most backward regions; the Antaran endeavour to help handloom artisans hit hard by the lockdown; an initiative in Andhra Pradesh to preserve a centuries-old tradition of handcrafted toys; and an account of how women in Bihar are finding their way to financial independence.

There’s more to bite into as well. We have updates on the multi-state migration programme of the Tata Trusts and on how the collective organisation’s support to contain the coronavirus pandemic has panned out. Our photo essay frames a picture-postcard look at an innovative ‘floating huts’ venture in Manipur’s Loktak lake.

This issue of the magazine also features interviews with Ramon Magsaysay award winner Anshu Gupta of the path-breaking NGO Goonj, and with Shaheen Mistri, education warrior and founder of Teach For India. We have opinion pieces penned by Partha Mukhopadhyay of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, and the Trusts’ own Prabhat Pani.

Happy reading and all the very best, dear reader, for what we hope will be a better year than the one we cannot wait to say goodbye to.

Christabelle Nandini

We hope you will help us make Horizons better with your valuable feedback.
Please do write to us at horizons@tatatrusts.org.
FROM DARKNESS TO DIGNITY
The well-being of Mumbai’s sanitation employees — an invisible workforce the city turns a blind eye to — is at the heart of Mission Garima

VIRUS FOCUS
Supporting governments and communities in containing Covid-19 has been a priority for the Tata Trusts

LONG ROAD HOME
Migrants and the troubles they have to endure are at the forefront of a programme that is expanding and evolving

WHAT MATTERS MOST IS THE WILL AND INTENT TO DO GOOD’
Magsaysay award winner Anshu Gupta opens up on the personal and the professional, on rural development and the people at the heart of his nonprofit, Goonj
SAVINGS GRACE
Paving the path to financial independence is the objective of a credit cooperative society in Bihar that counts 4,500 women among its members.

FOOD IS THE FUEL
School-going children from Maharashtra's tribal belt are getting their fill of nutrition, thanks to the Annapurna Central Kitchens programme.

TOY STORY SHINING
The Kondapalli toymakers of Andhra Pradesh have found a new way to preserve their craft and enhance their income.

RIDING THE WEAVES
Handloom artisans laid low by the lockdown are tapping the power of digital to reach far-flung customers.

OUT OF THE WOODS
Vilified and marginalised from British colonial times, West Bengal's Kheria Sabar tribe needs help — and has found some.

FLOATING FEELING
Eco-friendly homestays that run on solar energy are transforming the lives of fisher folk from Loktak lake in Manipur.

‘EDUCATION IS THE ONLY WAY TO END POVERTY’
Shaheen Mistri of Teach For India talks about the National education Policy, schooling in pandemic times and being an ‘education warrior’.

TOGETHER EFFECT
Partnerships with a variety of entities underpin the success of Tata Trusts’ social development programmes.

FARMS ARE RURAL, BUT RURAL IS NOT JUST FARMS
Policymaking must reflect a nuanced understanding of the reality that there is much more to rural India than agriculture.
Two women at their home in Kyunja village in the Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand, a state where the self-help group movement has blossomed.
The grass is greener on the rural side

Buoyed by its own resilience and with a little help from the outside, rural India is riding out the storm of an uncertain present. By Philip Chacko

It pays to have social protection in times of crises. The bonds of family and community, a welfare architecture that has often been a lifeline and the comfort of the familiar have sustained India’s rural heartland during a period of unprecedented troubles, providing that rare bright spot in landscape littered with unrelenting challenges.

While urban India continues to suffer the battering of Covid-19 and its consequences, its rural counterpart has surprised naysayers by holding steady. Social welfare support initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Public Distribution System have been invaluable in keeping rural distress at bay, while community institutions and village bodies have punched above their weight. Together — and with another good monsoon adding to the positives — there is reason for cheer in the countryside.

Social development in all its hues has played a meaty part in creating the conditions for rural India to stay relatively stable in the face of multiple obstacles, to the extent that it became a haven for those driven back to their homesteads in the wake of the pandemic. The raft of community uplift programmes and initiatives unfolding in the villages of the country are having an effect, despite the almost inevitable lapses and cracks.

The government, at the centre and in the states, is the critical factor in the bulk of these programmes. Aiding the community cause are funding agencies, charity institutions and NGOs. Whether individually or in partnership, these entities are putting their shoulder to wheel of social development — in health and education, water and sanitation, livelihoods and nutrition.

Livelihoods is among the most vital in the list. It is estimated that up to 50% of the country’s population is a single ‘income shock’ away from sliding into destitution (that would add to the 22% Indians already below the poverty line). Initiatives to enhance incomes and livelihood opportunities are, in the context, crucial to people on the margins. It puts more money in the hands of the poor, especially women, food on the family table and it improves the possibilities of communities as a whole.

The livelihoods logic is central to the entire spectrum of social uplift projects and initiatives that the Tata Trusts undertake in rural
India. Organising village communities, through self-help groups, federations and farmer organisations, is an imperative. Agriculture by itself is never enough in the equation thereafter. The extras — livestock rearing, dairy development, fisheries, etc — have to be brought into the mix.

“The majority of India’s small and marginal farmers are in agriculture out of compulsion; they don’t have an option,” explains Arun Pandhi, director, programme implementation, at the Tata Trusts. “Activities allied to agriculture, be it selling milk or keeping goats, are what actually sustains underprivileged rural communities.”

Experience and expertise are the lodestar in the effort. “Working with the rural poor is in our DNA and our forte is bringing about catalytic change in the communities we engage with,” says Malavika Chauhan, head of rural upliftment at the Trusts. “The bottom of the pyramid is our focus — the poorest of the poor — and we reach out to them...”

— Malavika Chauhan, head, rural upliftment, Tata Trusts

Mr Pandhi is optimistic about rural India and its prospects. “If you consider the development paradigm across the world, our evolution is at par,” he says. “People will move to urban areas unless there is something for them to stay back for. Can you reverse this? No. Can you guide it better? Yes. Are we doing a good job? Not quite as a country, but if we get our fundamentals right over a period of time, we can do a lot more.”

As the stories that follow show, the Tata Trusts have got their fundamentals in order.
Vimala Katara had made up her mind: either her husband and mother-in-law relent and let her join the newly formed village self-help group (SHG), or she would leave her marital home and go live with her parents. They did not and she did. It’s a decision Ms Katara has never regretted in the 17 years since.

“I had no job, my husband was a daily wage labourer, our house was a hut and we did not have enough to eat,” recalls Ms Katara, now 53, of a time when the concept of SHGs was hazy — and the target of widespread patriarchal prejudice — in her village, Nanoda in Rajasthan’s Dungarpur district. “A cousin in a nearby hamlet had shared her experience of being an SHG member and it was good. I was ready to take the plunge, come what may, and I intended to take the lead in forming our own group.”

Ms Katara was convinced becoming part of an SHG would show her a way out of near penury. It has worked out better than that. It has also, strangely enough, been the reason she was welcomed back by her spouse and in-laws. “I took
A history of awakening

The origins of the self-help group (SHG) phenomenon can be traced back to the ‘rotating saving and credit association’, a concept that emerged in 19th-century Europe. This matured and evolved over time before it was taken to a superior level by Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus with his microcredit scheme for the poor, particularly women, in Bangladesh.

Mr Yunus, whose ideas were cemented by way of a research project in Jobra village in 1976, would go on to establish the trailblazing Grameen Bank seven years later in Chittagong. Grameen Bank saw itself as a microfinance and community development organisation, and it focused on those under the radar of conventional lending institutions. The success of its saving and credit methodologies inspired many similar efforts in countries around the world.

As Mr Yunus articulated it, the principle was simple: “The collateral for any loan are trust and peer pressure.” SHGs live by this principle.

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SHGs (or their variants) first came about in India in Andhra Pradesh in the early 1980s. They started springing up in Tamil Nadu next and then spread to other parts of the country. The results were promising enough for the government to take note. Soon enough, several state rural development departments, funding agencies and NGOs began promoting savings and credit groups for women.

A turning point came in 1992, when the central government-owned National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development launched its ‘SHG-bank linkage programme’. The initiative connected 500 SHGs to formal bank credit and was fairly successful. But progress was patchy initially. There was a dearth of funding, with many banks still not convinced about the worthiness of lending to informal groups of villagers. The doubters did not seem ready to trust Mr Yunus’s code on collateral.

It took 12 years for the first one million SHGs to get linked to banks. Things moved a bit faster after that, with the next million reached in 24 months. The groups themselves learned and evolved, meanwhile, and they proliferated. SHGs are now ubiquitous in the Indian countryside — many villages have multiple groups — they have been co-opted as partners in a spectrum of social uplift programmes, and the voices of their leaders and members are heard.

The launch of the Indian government’s National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) in 2012 accorded official recognition to the inherent advantages of SHGs and their power to drive social development. (The Tata Trusts and their partners are collaborating in several states with NRLM to strengthen SHGs and federations.)

Despite the positives, SHGs and their larger groupings — clusters, federations, etc — still seem to be far from realising their potential. The reasons are well-documented: shortage of credit supply by banks and financial institutions, the uneven quality of groups, contradictions in policymaking, lack of capacity building, and precious little resource support from the outside.

These are challenges that can be surmounted. Rural India deserves as much.
my first loan — Rs500 — six months after joining the SHG and bought a bag of wheat for my in-laws,” says Ms Katara. “Then I took a loan of Rs10,000 to dig a well at their house and lay pipelines. That’s when my mother-in-law came and brought me home.”

The savings-and-credit credo that SHGs swear by has been a saviour for Ms Katara. It has enabled her to level the barren land her family owned and turn her husband to farming, rebuild her house, buy a tractor and set her son up in the flour-mill business. Beyond the material, it has given Ms Katara a sense of self-esteem. The high point, she says, came in 2016 at an SHG event organised in Delhi: “Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited our stall.”

**Breaking barriers**

Self-esteem was a factor for Swaraji Devi, too, and caste bigotry the cause to bring it to the fore. The 37-year-old treasurer of a 20-member SHG in Naitala village in Uttarakhand’s Uttarkashi district, Ms Swaraji belongs to a scheduled caste community. That became a barrier when she got involved in dairy development soon after her SHG was set up.

“It was the practice that scheduled caste families like ours could not sell their milk at the village collection centre; I was livid,” says Ms Swaraji. “I brought this up at our SHG and our cooperative, arguing that we were all part of a collective and that this kind of discrimination could not be allowed to continue. There was a...
debate and things changed. I made Rs60,000 last year by selling milk and that would not have happened in the old days.”

Separated by a distance of 1,200km and differences in culture and background, Ms Katara and Ms Swaraji are, nevertheless, united by the idea that SHGs represent. They are two among the countless members — the vast majority of them women — who provide strength and sustenance to the more than 11,150 SHGs and similar village-level organisations that form the bedrock of the livelihood programmes undertaken by the Tata Trusts across rural India.

The Trusts have been seeding and nurturing the SHG ecosystem from when the term came into play in India in the early 1990s. The logic of it is irrefutable. The first step in any social sector effort is organising rural communities. From that flows SHGs and other village organisations, which then get combined into clusters, federations, etc. These entities are the most effective drivers of change in rural regions, determinants of how successful social uplift initiatives can be.

**Bit by incremental bit**

The more cohesive, well-trained and durable a village organisation and its aggregates are, the greater the chance of improving the lives of their members, bit by incremental bit. That’s how it has played out for the Tata Trusts’ projects in the livelihoods sphere, in agriculture, dairy development, livestock rearing, fisheries, even rural tourism.

The path and the pattern allow for local variations but are otherwise pretty set — bring women and village influencers together, encourage others to join the fold, create capacity and capabilities, facilitate financial inclusion, employ appropriate technology, enable beneficiaries to access government schemes, promote small-scale enterprises and connect produce to market. Underpinning it all is the savings and credit way.

The jewels in the crown are the SHGs. These groups have grown,
slowly and unsteadily, to become a critical factor in the impact of community development programmes. Ever-present in the countryside, their numbers are sizeable: a 2019 report by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) stated that there were nearly 10 million SHGs in India, covering 120 million families and with deposits of Rs233.24 billion.

The SHG movement, and it can justifiably be called so, got going in the country in the early 1980s in Andhra Pradesh. The inspiration was Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and his pioneering microfinance scheme in Bangladesh. The big boost — and the SHG moniker — arrived in 1992, when NABARD began linking these units to banks. But SHGs were always more than a conduit for credit.

**Beauty in the model**

“The beauty of the SHG model is that you can do so much with it,” says Malika Srivastava, the Trusts’ regional manager for Rajasthan. “It is built on the capacity of women to take it forward, to take ownership, to have agency. The model is not limited to savings, credit, training and managing finances. These women bond with one another, they become more aware of the world around them, and they learn how to prioritise, how to fix norms, how to take decisions."

Ms Srivastava and her colleagues were sceptical when they first started mobilising women into SHGs, back in 2003, in Rajasthan. “The locations were backward and the situation of women in general was not good,” says Ms Srivastava. “We wondered if beginning something in agriculture, say, would be preferable to focusing on savings and credit. The process was slow and so was progress. But now, after all these years, we have seen them evolve gradually, become independent, more confident and taking on leadership positions.”

In Uttarakhand, where the Trusts have been supporting SHGs from 2007, the main objective has been to put money in the hands of women. “That’s when they get empowered,” says Shashi Bhushan Uniyal, a team leader with Himmotthan, an associate organisation of the Trusts that has worked extensively on community initiatives in the hill state. “Earning from agriculture or livestock means these women have some amount of cash of their own that they can spend however they like.”

Rajasthan and Uttarakhand have done particularly well in maximising the gains that SHGs can deliver to rural women and their families. Tata Trusts-backed SHGs support more than 165,000 women in Rajasthan and some 42,000 women in Uttarakhand. Whether as champions of change or merely members, these women and their collectives have contributed to revealing an essential truth: in social development, the so-called weaker gender is actually the stronger. And the community is better off for it. ■
A fair crop

Call it agriculture-plus, an approach that attempts to maximise livelihood returns in some of the country’s poorest rural reaches.
Kushan Baskey has fixed a new roof for his modest dwelling and he isn’t inclined to stop there. The 35-year-old tribal from Patna village in Odisha’s Keonjhar district is looking to build a “concrete-roof house with four rooms”. Additional income in hand means he can look ahead to that and more.

Growing chillies and rearing goats have fetched the five-member Baskey family an additional ₹96,000 in the past year. It’s a precious gain for Mr Kushan, a subsistence farmer till recently. Now he rides a new motorbike, thinks of setting aside money for his children’s education and is sure he can improve his lot further still.

Fellow-villagers Galuram Baskey and Pithoram Baskey — it’s common for tribal communities to share a surname — have trodden a similar pathway to a better life. Mr Galuram pulled in ₹85,000 over the year while Mr Pithoram did best of the three, securing an income increase of ₹142,000.

Adding it all up
Mr Kushan and his mates are part of Lakhpati Kisan (or ₹100,000 farmer), the centrepiece of a clutch of livelihood improvement programmes undertaken by the Tata Trusts across India. The dominant theme in these programmes is ‘agriculture and allied activities’, still the mainstay of the country’s rural economy, and it covers farming and much more: animal husbandry, dairy development, fisheries and non-timber forest produce.

Agriculture and its add-ons

Agriculture and allied activities form the bulk of the livelihood programmes undertaken by the Tata Trusts across India

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<th>Reach</th>
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<td>1 million+ people in 8,959 villages in 21 states</td>
<td>Agriculture, animal husbandry, dairy development, fisheries, tourism</td>
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The standouts

- The Lakhpati Kisan initiative works to help 104,000 households from 821 tribal villages in Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Odisha improve their incomes to ₹100,000 a year over a 36-month period
- The piggery project in the Northeast has benefitted nearly 12,500 households in 259 villages of the region
- Under the Tata Dairy Mission, milk producer companies have been enablers for some 46,700 members in 918 villages of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Punjab
- The inland fisheries programme has been a boon for more than 35,000 families in six states, most prominently Andhra Pradesh
This agriculture-plus approach is calibrated to boost the ability of rural and tribal communities to extract more from what is available by way of land and local conditions. Advancing the rural livelihoods cause, especially for women and people from scheduled castes and tribes, is the overall objective and it begins with organising village communities and providing them with access to capital and a spectrum of services.

Implemented by Tata Trusts’ associate organisation Collectives for Integrated Livelihood Initiatives, Lakhpati Kisan — with 104,000 households from 821 tribal villages in Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Odisha within its fold — stands out among the programmes targeted at realising the livelihoods goal. From possibility to premise, Lakhpati Kisan has blossomed to stay true to its name, which is about getting previously marginalised rural farmers past the ₹100,000 a year in earnings’ mark.

More than 40,000 rural families have breached the ₹100,000 barrier since the initiative was launched in 2015, lifted irreversibly out of poverty and with a solid foundation to aim higher. The road is well mapped: align everything with agriculture, create robust and resilient village-based organisations — self-help groups (SHGs) and their aggregates — introduce fruitful new farming methods and technology, add animal husbandry, fisheries or other projects that fit the mix, seed entrepreneurs and training programmes, link the produce to markets, and tap governmental support and resources.

Akin to Lakhpati Kisan is the effort by Kalike, a Tata Trusts associate organisation in Karnataka’s Yadgir district. Kalike is involved in a range of projects, from education and skilling to livelihoods and water and sanitation. In livelihoods, the focus is on agriculture, the primary...
source of income for 67% of the local workforce.

Productivity, income and healthy farmer institutions form the lens through which Kalike sees its projects. This informs the adoption and sharing of best practices, collaborations with government institutions, optimal water usage methods, credit and marketing support, and the promotion of technology.

**Women first**

“Purchasing some land, educating my children further, investing in equipment — I have been able to do all of that after joining the project,” says Hampayya Sadiri, a farmer from Allipur village who has prospered since shifting to the cultivation of green gram, groundnuts and fruits. “I was confused about the technology initially but there was guidance and I learned.”

The learning curve has proved valuable for the Tata Trusts’ piggery project in the Northeast and for their fisheries and dairy development initiatives as well. Run by the North East Initiative Development Agency, another associate entity of the Trusts, the piggery venture addresses the entire value chain of the enterprise: breeding and feeding, sty hygiene, veterinary services, training and marketing. Nearly 12,500 households in 259 villages of the region have benefitted from the project.

The dairy development effort is spearheaded by the Dairy Health and Nutrition Initiative India Foundation (DHANII), which comes under the Tata Dairy Mission, set up in 2016 to be an enabler for milk producers by providing varied livestock services. Through DHANII, five milk producer companies have been established — two in Rajasthan and one each in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Punjab — and they together comprise about 46,700 members in 918 villages.

The inland fisheries programme has helped in excess of 35,000 families in six states, and there’s more in it than fish. Besides culture fisheries in public water bodies and fish farming in individually owned ponds, the project backs allied activities that offer additional livelihood opportunities to the farmers involved: fish-breeding nurseries, pond-based horticulture, the growing of vegetables and fruits on embankments, and the rearing of poultry.
Technology, tinkered and tailored

Technology is the understated ingredient in the blend of elements the Tata Trusts have used across the board in their livelihood programmes, be it in agriculture, dairy development, livestock management or fisheries.

Drip irrigation, solar-powered pumps, water decomposers, interactive voice response services and small-scale mechanisation — technological inputs have been crucial in optimising outcomes in the Trusts’ livelihood interventions. The intent is not to chase after technology but, rather, to obtain the most effective at the lowest cost.

“We decided right at the beginning that we needed to be innovative and not stereotypical,” says Ganesh Neelam, zonal manager for central and east India with the Trusts. “Our eye was on new technologies that would aid small landholders. We want our beneficiaries to understand how a particular technology works and how to integrate it.”

With farm mechanisation, it has been a pointed approach. “Small landholders don’t need big tractors and big harvesters,” adds Mr Neelam. “We went for small mechanisation that suits the farming plots we deal with. These are fragmented, so you need equipment that can move in tiny pockets. We were not sure our farmers would opt for such technologies but they surprised us with their ready acceptance.”

A clean and reliable source of energy was another important requirement. Solar power has provided just that. “Regular electricity supply is an issue in most of the places where our livelihood projects are being implemented; solar is an appropriate solution in the circumstances, and it is clean,” says Mr Neelam. “We are also promoting biogas technology for clean cooking, the advantage being that the slurry discharged in the process is a very good fertiliser.”
Women’s groups, as ever, are the fulcrum of an endeavour that has delivered where it counts. Taken together, the programmes of the Tata Trusts in the livelihoods sphere have reached close to 9,000 villages in 21 states of India. The vast majority of people being lent a hand are small and marginal farmers, many of them previously living below the defined poverty line for rural India (pegged at an income of ₹1,059 a month). Choreographing the conditions necessary to bring extra income to these folks, without disturbing their social and cultural equilibrium, is a complicated task.

**Big basket of offerings**

“We go and understand the situation on the ground and then engage with families to improve their methods, be it with agriculture or allied livelihoods,” says Ganesh Neelam, zonal manager for central and east India with the Trusts. “Once we are able to understand the gaps, we try building the capacity of the farmers and exposing them to superior processes and technologies. The rest follows: better practices, better seeds and fertilisers, better marketing. It’s handholding and facilitation support that we provide.”

Mr Neelam is clear about what really matters when the results are tallied. “It comes down, ultimately, to food security and a steady, growing income,” he says. “About 90% of the households we start with are in the below-poverty line category. Most of them used to make ₹35,000 or less a year from agriculture and related activities. We concentrate on ways to enhance this amount three-four times over a fixed period.”

Convincing communities steeped in traditional ways and suspicious of the new and untested is the first and foremost challenge in making that happen. “It’s difficult to persuade villagers to accept change,” adds Mr Neelam. “We work with women and leaders within the villages; we try and engage them in the initiative. Others are then inclined to follow and that’s how we expand the project’s reach and move towards making it sustainable.”

Sustainability comes from having integrated options and, in the longer term, through collaborations. The Trusts actively promote and pursue partnerships with government bodies and donor agencies. A persistent pinprick is the serious shortage of credit support from financial institutions, a reality Mr Neelam bemoans.

The sustainability question attached to the programmes has been answered in the places where community institutions are thriving. “Our learning has been that women-led village organisations and high-quality services, ideally provided by local entrepreneurs, are fundamental to any such livelihood initiative,” says Mr Neelam. “We have exited from villages and they have managed the show by themselves. That’s encouraging.”

The agriculture-and-more mode — livelihoods layering, as it is termed — done correctly and persisted with, can provide for a rural family of five-six members, believes Mr Neelam. “What we ensure is that they have the necessary support systems, guidance and assets. These villagers don’t always have to migrate.”

Livestock rearing is a key part of the allied activities in the livelihoods programme.
The plural in rural

An integrative and interdisciplinary approach that takes in multiple aspects is required to achieve transformative change in the lives of rural communities.

Three decades of growth and structural transformation have resulted in profound changes in Indian society. Despite rapid growth in small towns and cities, and accompanying changes in people’s aspirations and opportunities, the majority of the country’s population still lives in rural settlements, dependent on land and natural resources for their continued subsistence.

Small landholdings and ecological destruction threaten the viability of purely agrarian livelihoods, while the spread of education and better connectivity create new opportunities for diversification. As economic structures become increasingly dominated by the role of capital and the power of the market, it is important to remain attentive to the concerns and aspirations of communities exploited, marginalised or ignored by these transformative forces.

What the 2020 pandemic has revealed are the vulnerabilities that lie at the heart of Indian society, the insecurities of those who have been relegated to the margins of the growth experience since the 1990s. In this moment of exception, as economic activity was temporarily suspended, migrant labourers far from the safety of their erstwhile rural homes found their livelihoods denied and their humanity stripped away.

While social protection mechanisms such as MGNREGA (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) have provided immediate relief to those able to return to their villages, the crisis has also re-emphasised the need to understand rural transformations, and to find ways to make sustainable and equitable interventions that improve agrarian lives and livelihoods.

Influences from far and wide

I have had the privilege to work with students, scholars, colleagues and decision makers over this period, studying and writing about these issues. With an initial training in economics, I am now based in the Department of Geography at Cambridge, a place that embraces interdisciplinarity, drawing on influences from across the natural sciences, social sciences and the arts and humanities to understand the close links between people and nature, and how these are changing.

Our work engages with, and is especially attentive to, the initiatives, knowledge and lived experiences of agrarian and rural communities. Equally, we work with the understanding that such communities are internally differentiated and spatially diverse.

Rural communities are widely accepted to be structured on the axes of class, caste, gender, ethnicity and/or religion. These manifest not only in the relations between...
households but also within households, especially in the case of gender. At the same time, the particular configuration of these axes varies by agro-ecological location, political and policy context, and historical developments. Our research seeks to understand the present and potential futures of rural lives and livelihoods in the light of these lived social and material realities of people.

Our work at Cambridge has developed important synergies with the activities of the Tata Trusts. In a project that focused on ecosystem services in the Himalayan region, our activities intersected with several initiatives of Trusts’ Himmotthan Pariyojana. Our project investigated the ways in which people living in and around six small towns in the western Himalayas access water through a diversity of sources, from springs to piped supply, and the sustainability challenges faced by these sources.

Through multiple and far-ranging case studies in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand...
and Nepal, our team has drawn out important lessons relevant to understanding water supply and demand-use dynamics in hill regions, as well as policy options to secure water supplies for the needs of these hill residents.

In subsequent project-related dissemination, we have held major public engagement activities (including an exhibition of photographs, Pani, Pahar), and have developed educational material on water security for use at the school level.

Over the last few months, we have engaged with the Tata Trusts’ Lakhpati Kisan initiative, a multidimensional intervention focused on improving the incomes and livelihoods of farming families in the central Indian tribal belt. This intervention complements the work that we are undertaking at Cambridge under a major funded programme, TIGR2ESS (transforming India’s green revolution by research and empowerment for sustainable food supplies).

Our flagship project focuses on ‘sustainable and transformative agrarian and rural trajectories’ (START), studying the challenges of moving towards a sustainable and equitable agricultural system across diverse agro-ecological landscapes in India.

Our research team includes colleagues...
from the University of Cambridge and the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, collaborating in India with ICRISAT (the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics), the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation and PRADAN. With research being undertaken across a wide variety of locations — from the coasts of Tamil Nadu and the irrigation tank sites of Telangana to forested villages in Bihar and the irrigated plains of Punjab — this project reflects on some of the most pressing political, economic and policy issues of agricultural development in India.

**Blend of interventions**
The Lakhpati Kisan initiative adopts a multi-pronged approach to addressing these challenges. It provides a range of interventions, including irrigation development; agrarian adaptation; livestock development; introduction of high-quality seeds and sapling nurseries; IT and education; improvements in water quality; and promoting community institutions.

Our analysis was based on data on the first five years of this programme (2015 to 2020) and took in baseline studies as well as trend-analysis datasheets. The overall trends suggest that participants in the programme recorded significant increases in their income over the intervention period.

Our analysis suggested some ways in which future monitoring and data collection could allow for a more rigorous approach to programme evaluation for this initiative, and also recommended the importance of gathering more qualitative, narrative evidence of the impact of the programme on the lives of participants. As part of an iterative learning process, we hope that some of our insights might be of value as this initiative goes into the next phase of implementation.

Our broader portfolio of work, informed by deep and meaningful partnerships with researchers and civil society organisations in India, suggests that there are real opportunities for donors, governments and businesses to work closely with rural communities to achieve transformative changes in their lives and livelihoods.

This requires an integrative and interdisciplinary approach, combining the need to understand and enhance production systems, while recognising the importance of ecological stability and resilience, and promoting equitable access and people’s rights.
Manual scavenging, the vile practice of manually clearing sewers and drains, should be anathema to modern civilised societies. However, though it was outlawed in India in 2013, the practice of manual scavenging continues and has remained largely beyond the bounds of rules and regulations, even in urban centres like Mumbai.

As a result, those employed as manual scavengers continue to lead a difficult and humiliating life. They risk lives and health daily, and endure stigma and discrimination. Remuneration is low for the indignity they have to endure, and the chances of contracting disease are high.

Mission Garima, a joint initiative of the Tata Trusts and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), aims to promote safe, healthy and humane working conditions for Mumbai’s sanitation workers. Using innovation and technology, it aims to bring garima (dignity) to their work and their lives.

The project traces its beginning to early 2014, when the Tata Trusts Chairman Ratan Tata saw a photo-essay on Mumbai’s sanitation workers by acclaimed photographer Sudharak Olwe. The stark images highlighted the dismal lives of the men and women who risk their health every day to unclog drains and move garbage, often without basic safety equipment. The visual after visual of suffering and indignity was the genesis of Mission Garima.

A 2015 report by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences helped the Mission Garima team define a strategy for the programme. The report was based on extensive research and a survey of about 32,000 sanitation workers in 24 municipal wards of Mumbai. It helped narrow down Mission Garima’s scope to four key areas: making available high-quality personal protection equipment (PPE) and cleaning machinery; providing access to medical services; upgrading worker shelters (called chowkis); and generating public
awareness about waste segregation and management.

The survey also uncovered some terrible facts. “We found that the average lifespan of a sanitation worker is 52 years, against a normal of 65-70 years,” says Divyang Waghela, head, Tata Water Mission, under which Mission Garima operates. In addition, over a quarter of the surveyed workers had met with a major accident at work, and one-third had been ill over the previous year, with respiratory illnesses, malaria and dengue being the most common afflictions.

**Safety shortage**

While 69% of the interviewed workers had received some sort of safety gear, the study concluded that their quality and availability were inadequate. Safety has always been the biggest concern for sanitation workers. Regular contact with garbage and sewage water leads to a high risk of infection and the situation has been made worse by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (since sanitation workers could potentially come in contact with virus-bearing waste in the course of their work).

Proper tools and equipment and adequate safety protocols are a critical element of the project, and with good reason. The workers needed masks, gloves and boots of enhanced quality due to their frequent exposure to sewer cleaning, and the resultant health risks.

“We supported the MCGM in identifying and procuring better-quality PPE kits and machines, and at no extra cost,” says Mr Waghela. Tata Consultancy Services was roped
A space to call their own

The end of his shift has got a whole lot better for Ravi Bumbak, a sweeper posted in the Safed Pul area of Kurla in Mumbai. Not just because it marks the end of another hot, dusty and tiring day, but because Mr Bumbak now has a place he can retire to in reasonable comfort.

The model chowki (worker shelter) set up in Kurla by the Mission Garima team has been designed and built specifically for conservancy staffers such as Mr Bumbak. The Kurla shelter, spread over 2,000 square feet and costing about ₹3 million, is a far cry from the ‘container rooms’ usually provided by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai to sanitation workers.

“The old chowki had very little space and one common washroom,” says Mr Bumbak. “Only four-five workers could use it at a time; the rest of us would wait outside for our turn.” That has changed.

Inaugurated in February 2020, the model chowki was designed after consulting conservancy workers and understanding their needs. The finished structure has separate rooms for male and female staff, ample storage space, multiple restrooms, handwash and shower facilities, a microwave oven to heat food, even a recreation zone and an outdoor gym.

About 100-150 workers use the chowki on any given day. “Many of us use the outdoor gym before starting our shift,” says Mr Bumbak. “And when we end our shifts, we freshen up there, meet together as a group, and play carrom or chess. It is a good stressbuster. I hope all my fellow-workers get this benefit.” That’s a wish Mission Garima hopes to make true.
Surprisingly, caution marked the initial response of the workers to the setting up of the clinic, as they didn’t want to make their health problems known. It took time and consistent effort by the Garima team to gain the workers’ trust.

Sushila Pawar is one of the beneficiaries of the initiative. The 57-year-old, who has worked with MCGM as a sweeper for 15 years, is a diabetes patient. “I get diabetes medicine at a lower cost from the clinic regularly,” she says.

A second clinic has been established under Mission Garima — in Chembur in March 2018 — and there has been a gradual increase in the number of patients using the services on offer. To date, some 5,400 people, primarily sanitation workers, have visited the Garima clinics. Besides the ones at Kurla and Chembur, registered workers can visit any of Swasth’s 11 other clinics across Mumbai for consultations and treatment.

Mission Garima has also been looking at why manual cleaning interventions are so pervasive. One reason is dry waste. India’s cities are huge generators of dry bits of garbage. This garbage, especially the plastic waste in it, clogs gutters, sewers and stormwater drains. It requires massive resources and personnel to unclog them.

**Dry run**

To deal with the dry waste scourge, the team started a behavioural-change communication campaign. The intent was to drive home the importance of segregating dry waste. “The challenge was to overcome the mindset barrier among citizens and to demonstrate the benefits of separating dry, wet and hazardous waste,” says Mr Waghela.

The 15-day campaign focused on about 3,000 households in slum areas of Tunga village in Chandivali, with local volunteers going door-to-door to explain the need for waste segregation. The campaign didn’t quite achieve the hoped-for impact, as there was a lack of separate trucks to carry away the segregated waste, but it did build awareness.

The Mission has got going with work on a special component in the project: building a model chowki, a shelter where sanitation workers can store uniforms and equipment, and catch a bit of rest. The first such chowki came up in Kurla in February 2020 and has become hugely popular with staffers.

“Earlier, workers had problems with space for changing clothes, separate toilet facilities for men and women, or storing equipment. Now there’s ample space for them to do this and relax after shifts,” says Santosh Rokade, a junior overseer with MCGM. A second chowki is now under construction in Goregaon and the team hopes to build more of these shelters.

The Garima team has other plans as well for Goregaon. A 2,500-sq ft dry waste collection and sorting centre will be established there in partnership with MCGM. On-ground interventions on the worker safety front have also kicked off. “We have distributed PPE kits to workers in the ward and taken their feedback,” says Ms Redkar.

To support these efforts, a behavioural change campaign aimed at the area’s residents will be launched. The aim is to remind people that waste has to be managed at the individual level, not left to the civic administration or a sanitation worker. Mission Garima has been successful in improving the lot of the sanitation workers in Mumbai, however, more ground needs to be covered.

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*By Nikhil Menon*
Many of Mumbai’s army of sanitation workers lead a pitiable existence. Risking their lives and health every day to keep the city’s drains and gutters unclogged and flowing, they often have to endure stigma and discrimination. Photojournalist Sudharak Olwe has captured the lives of these warriors in an acclaimed series on conservancy workers in India.
Once inside, there is nothing but darkness and slime. The worker is cut off from the world above and risks are everywhere: he could pass out from inhaling toxic gas, slip in the waste and lose consciousness, or be carried away by a rush of sludge.

The garbage that the workers rake out includes animal carcasses, food leftovers, biomedical waste and toxic chemicals.
The work is backbreaking. The tools of the trade are primitive. Hands pick up the garbage. Shoulders carry it. Jadhav (foreground) does not like to talk about his work. He nods when asked if his shoulders hurt.

Manek reports for work at 6am. He is always worried that the supervisor will mark him absent if he is late and give his job to a temporary hand. This happens all the time. Manek first sweeps the main road and then a gulli (a narrow lane between buildings). Manek has cleaned this gulli for 15 years. He wears a helmet because he has to watch out for waste dumped from the windows above: fish guts and scraps, beer bottles, hot water, kitchen rubbish...
Two-three families — a total of 20-25 people in a single room is a common feature.
Kamble’s wife works as a domestic servant. Sometimes her memsaheb (madam) gives her food to take home. Home is a portion of the staircase. Kamble and his wife raise three children here.
Hiraman’s wife refused to be photographed. She is forever at odds with her husband. She kept threatening to leave him. He keeps telling her to shut up. It is not likely that Hiraman’s wife will leave. It is more likely that Hiraman, who is visibly shrinking, will die soon. In which case the municipal corporation will consider her a ‘pity case’ and give her Hiraman’s job.

A group of widows of sanitation workers. Remarriage is out of the question. They would lose their jobs and their kholis.
Supporting governments and communities in containing Covid-19 has been a priority for the Tata Trusts

It’s a task fraught with uncertainty — taking on a shape-shifting crisis in a hurry and devising a response that works without disrupting the larger picture. That’s the tricky challenge the Tata Trusts have confronted while joining the shared fight against Covid-19, even as they keep their social development programmes running.

There’s no doubt where the attention is concentrated. Since March 2020, the Tata Trusts have been in hyper drive with their contribution in containing the pandemic, by helping governments, communities and civil society cope better with it.

The Tata Trusts Chairman Ratan Tata spoke about the ‘need of the hour’ soon after the Trusts and the Tata group had together committed ₹15 billion to India’s Covid-19 relief effort. The effort is centred on bolstering India’s healthcare infrastructure and supporting communities in need.

**Hospitals**

Setting up hospitals to treat Covid-19 victims was a key undertaking and this was entrusted to the Trusts’ cancer care team, which worked with Tata Projects. The team reached out to state health departments to upgrade existing infrastructure into coronavirus treatment centres. The move paid off.

By end-August, the Trusts had converted four hospital buildings into Covid-care facilities. Two of these are in Maharashtra: a 50-bed centre in Sangli and one with 104 beds in Buldhana. Two more have come up in Uttar Pradesh: a 168-bed hospital in Gautam Buddha Nagar and a 124-bed centre in Gonda, both developed in collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Designed to offer a range of treatment services, the centres have critical care...
capabilities, operation theatres, basic pathology and radiology labs, etc.

**Training**

Augmenting the critical-care skills of medical personnel working on the ground has been another important initiative in the Trusts’ Covid-relief spread. The Trusts tied up with Christian Medical College, Vellore, and the Care Institute of Health Sciences, Hyderabad, to create online programmes to train doctors, nurses and paramedical staff.

This 22-hour training module, which covers, among other things, airway and ventilator management, has been provided free to about 200 hospitals in 19 states.

**Equipment**

Covid-19 caught the entire world and its healthcare systems napping. It did more in India, exposing how inadequate the country’s health ecosystem is and how short it was in dealing with an infectious outbreak.

Health sector and frontline workers were at maximum risk and in dire need of protection. The Trusts have stepped up with support here. Some 3 million pieces of coveralls, face masks, surgical masks, gloves and goggles were imported and donated to workers in 32 states and union territories.

**Community outreach**

The Tata Trusts team has rolled out a pan-India communication campaign to build awareness about multiple aspects of the pandemic. Reaching an estimated audience of 21 million people in 21 states, the campaign takes in safe behaviour — social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, etc — understanding Covid-19 and its symptoms, treatment avenues and more.

Called 5 Kadam, Corona Mukt Jeevan (five steps to a Corona-free life), the campaign features some 300 video messages, animated audiovisuals and infographics that are packaged in a variety of languages.

The campaign was used to train in excess of 8,700 community volunteers to spread the word on the virus.

**Sustenance**

As India imposed a severe lockdown to contain the spread of Covid-19, jobs and livelihoods dried out. These people needed a helping hand, and immediately.

The Trusts-backed Annapurna Central Kitchens project in Nashik and Palghar in Maharashtra — which ordinarily delivers meals to more than 28,000 school-going children from the state’s tribal belt — started feeding stranded migrants. In addition, 1.6 million packets of a nutritious snack called GoMo were distributed to vulnerable communities in several states.

The 730,000-plus beneficiaries of the GoMo initiative included street dwellers, shelter-home residents, migrant workers, police personnel, ragpickers, etc.

**Support**

Across India, the Trusts organised a slew of community programmes in support of Covid-relief initiatives. In Hyderabad, under the ‘Elder Spring’ programme aimed at senior citizens, a helpline had volunteers handling requests from the aged for food and medicines. Crafts initiative Antaran Artisan Connect, meanwhile, enabled 230 artisans to stay afloat through an online campaign that netted ₹3.9 million in prepaid orders.

The ‘data-driven governance’ project partnered the government think tank, NITI Aayog, in researching the impact of the outbreak on residents of 885 villages across India. And, in a personal move, nearly 1,200 employees in the Tata Trusts family collectively contributed about ₹3 million to fund food and rations for migrant families stranded in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

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By Gayatri Kamath
For 20-year-old Rinku Kumar, the period immediately following the Covid-19 lockdown of March 2020 is a nightmare he would like to forget. With no work available and his meagre savings running out, Mr Kumar was forced to beg for food supplies on credit from local shopkeepers.

Like many other workers who migrate to urban centres, Mr Kumar had come to Mumbai to earn money as a daily labourer so that he could repay the loans that burdened his 12-member family back home in Taalbaghaua village in Uttar Pradesh’s Shravasti district. When jobs were available, he worked around 20 days a month, earning ₹500 a day. Mr Kumar lived in a single room with a dozen others, scrounging and saving so he could send about ₹6,000 home every month.

When jobs dried up post lockdown, Mr Kumar and his co-workers had no option but to leave Mumbai and return home. With minimal transportation available, large parts of the 1,200km distance had to be covered on foot in the harsh summer heat. The men spent 15 days on the road, often walking through the night until they were exhausted, living off whatever little food and drink were provided by good folks along the way.

Mr Kumar is one of an estimated 100 million migrants whose exodus to India’s cities is driven by the search for economic...
opportunities. The work these migrants do turns the wheels of the economy but, historically, they have remained outside the social security umbrella. The pandemic yanked away the cloak of invisibility when images of thousands of people trudging home thrust the issue into the national consciousness.

This is the marginalised section of India’s informal workforce that the Tata Trusts have been addressing since 2006 through their programmes under the migration theme.

**Forced to drift**

Typically, migrant workers leave their homes and fields in ‘source’ states such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha to earn money through low-skill work. They head for ‘destination’ states such as Gujarat, Haryana and Maharashtra to slog away in brickkilns, road-construction sites and building projects.

Migrants have always had the deck stacked against them: lack of identity papers and permanence of residency, widespread exploitation, meagre working and living conditions, limited access to welfare schemes, poor health indicators, limited access to food, and no real social safety net.

In 2016, the Trusts launched the latest phase of the migration programme and this is designed to lend a hand to migrants in the source states of Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. At its heart are multi-service centres known as Apna Seva Kendras (ASKs) that support migrants in a number of ways, linking them to government schemes and entitlements, providing legal assistance in wage disputes, workplace injury or death compensation, and with skill training, employment opportunities and banking services.

ASKs also work to reduce the vulnerabilities labourers face in brickkilns and the construction industry, and to ensure that they receive basic services such as housing, nutrition, water and sanitation. The need for these centres explains their proliferation: there are a total of 95 ASKs across 13 districts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha and they have been enablers for more than 1.3 million people.

“When Covid struck and the lockdown disrupted jobs, our migration initiative acquired an urgent and special relevance simply because millions of returning migrant workers needed support,” says Shikha Srivastava, who heads the urban habitat and migration portfolio at the Tata Trusts. “We decided to step up our ASKs to facilitate doorstep delivery and expand outreach to far-flung areas and migrants in other states.”

Studies commissioned by the Trusts in mid-May 2020 in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh revealed that over 80% of migrants reported loss of jobs and wages. Relief measures for migrant workers had been announced but the ground reality was that a majority of them were unaware of the aid they were entitled to, or they could not access benefits because of improper documentation.

**Tale of travails**

The story of 45-year-old construction worker Shankar, who resides in Bangarwada in Rajasthan’s Ajmer district with his disabled wife Kamla and four children, is an example of the awareness gap that undercuts migrants. Confined to his house since the lockdown, Mr Shankar had earned nothing for three months and Kamla’s disability pension had stopped.

The family was in dire straits and with little idea that they had recourse to government aid.

There likely are millions of families like Mr Shankar’s who are unable to tap official relief measures. Mission Gaurav (pride) was
launched by the Trusts to ease their woes.

It was rolled out in September 2020 to support and empower migrants. It plugs into the services offered by the ASKs and extends the outreach through a system focused on last-mile delivery. This involves community members known as *shramik mitras* (worker friends), and it depends on technology in the form of mobile ASK centres, a migration portal and an app.

Mission Gaurav will be implemented in six states that have witnessed the highest number of returnee migrants: Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, where the Trusts’ migration initiative is already up and running, as well as Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the Trusts and their implementing partners have a strong presence.

The Trusts are working to enhance the capacity of its existing migration portal, deploy a mobile app and create a centralised call centre to reach out to more beneficiaries. Approximately 107 ASKs, 45 mobile ASKs and 1,405 *shramik mitras* will be engaged in a project expected to cover 48 districts in the six states.

Awareness building on government schemes and entitlements, registering migrant families in the public distribution system so they have access to government subsidised staples, improving livelihood opportunities near their homes, facilitating banking operations, and linkages to skills training for work beyond farm labour — the mission covers a gamut of issues affecting migrants.

At a different level, the Trusts are involved in policy advocacy that draws on data analysis and evidence building to offer recommendations for policymakers at the centre and in the states. The objective is to facilitate long-term enhancements for migrants in employment and living conditions.

In its scope and vision, the mission is more than a response to an ongoing humanitarian crisis. It shines a bright light on the wider goal of the Trusts’ migration programme: to provide migrant workers with access to basic citizen rights that they have long been denied.

*By Anuradha Warrier*
‘What matters most is the will and intent to do good’

“The biggest asset of India’s villagers is their self-respect,” Anshu Gupta has been quoted as saying. “You don’t see beggars in villages,” he adds. The founder of Goonj, a nonprofit with an exemplary list of accomplishments to its name, and winner of the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2015, Mr Gupta speaks from experience gained by working with the rural poor for more than two decades in multiple social development programmes.

Goonj began in 1998 with an idea as original as it was impactful: using cloth as metaphor and material to meet the basic needs of people in rural India. Goonj employed cloth as a new development...
Rural development in India has come to mean different things to different people. What, in its essence, does it mean to you?

To understand rural development, I think we must first understand the symbiotic relationship between India’s cities and villages. Our sustenance in cities is made possible by the villages of India, right from the food on our table to cheap labour for our homes and factories. It all comes from the villages of India. The unequal allocation of resources, opportunities and policy-level attention to cities has meant that village India has lagged behind, even in the bare basics of life. Correcting this imbalance and inequality is rural development.

Valuing and dignifying the role and contribution of our farmers, artisans and craftspeople is vital and innovation must be a key component of rural development. Also, we have to utilise rural wisdom and efforts to nurture and build our natural resources. Last but not the least, you have to stand with and learn from rural communities in preparing for and dealing with natural disasters.

Development must include the welfare of the individual and the community, and this should be in rhythm with nature. Development has to value people, their agency, skills and knowledge. It must ensure that nature is nurtured when decisions are made for human beings. Anything that doesn’t enhance human dignity and agency, anything that pollutes, destroys and erodes nature can’t be development. These two factors are closely intertwined.

We have put human dignity and agency at the centre of our development work. This is especially pronounced in villages we are involved with, where the poor are usually conditioned to depend on currency to mobilise, motivate and empower marginalised folks in backward regions to work on issues such as education, health, infrastructure, environment and menstrual hygiene.

Under Goonj’s ‘dignity for work’ initiative, villagers identify their issues, evolve their own solutions and then put in efforts, wisdom and natural resources to build schools, roads, wells and more. Goonj rewards their labour with customised ‘family kits’ — which include clothes, dry rations, utensils and footwear — for every person who participates in the endeavour.

Mr Gupta, who overcame a near-debilitating injury suffered in a road accident when he was a teenager, opens up in this interview with Christabelle Noronha on the personal and the professional, on rural development and the people at the heart of it. Edited excerpts:
outsiders to take decisions about their lives. Instead, when we mobilise and motivate them to take these decisions and work with them, they start to value not just their own natural resources but also their own wisdom.

How did the idea of employing cloth as a development resource for the poor develop? Did you expect it to bloom in the way it has? Cloth as an issue evolved organically. I often saw homeless people on Delhi’s roads shivering in the winter cold. As I started going deeper into the need for clothing, many personal stories came alive, especially about how middle-class families invest in good clothes to make sure they look dignified. I realised how we all first judge people by their clothes, whether someone is rich or poor, educated or uneducated, urban or rural. Our work of 15 years on menstrual hygiene also started as a story of cloth.

What stood out for me in the initial years was the fact that even though cloth was a basic necessity it still wasn’t listed as a neglected need on any global, national or regional development agency’s agenda. That’s where our journey started. Over the years, cloth has become more of a metaphor for the many ignored needs of poor people. Dignity is the other basic need of any human being, rich or poor, just as with cloth. We have tried to weave in these two very different needs in our development work.

When urban India responded by contributing their surplus cloth and other material happily — feeling satisfied in channelising their discards for a good cause — it turned into a win-win idea. The biggest breakthrough was when some years ago a rural community that we had mobilised and

The underprivileged have an equal right and need to be valued as equal stakeholders and participants, feels Mr Gupta
motivated to identify their own problems and solutions made a bamboo bridge as part of our initiative. There was no monetary transaction; they only got our family kits as reward.

You have spoken about the necessity of changing the culture of charity in this country. What exactly does this imply in a milieu where the ‘art of giving’, particularly to non-religious causes, has found meagre expression?

Not just in India, I feel we need to change the culture of charity globally, as it makes the giver feel superior and the recipient a bit inferior, or lesser. Charity inherently places some of us as givers — of money, material, expertise, solutions, etc — and the poor as recipients of this ‘help’.

Charity is okay for some scenarios like disaster relief, till a person is able to get back on his or her feet. But I strongly believe that any development work that’s built on the unequal paradigm of charity cannot lead to sustained, deep-rooted development.

The Covid-19 outbreak appears to have brought governments, NGOs and charitable foundations together like never before. What will it take to make such collaboration the norm in the social development sphere?

I feel the way civil society and social entrepreneurs have responded to the Covid crisis in India is a case study — not just for our country but the entire world — on the role and relevance of the development sector in society. The sector has shown how it can rise to the occasion when the need arises, going beyond structures and issues and collaborating to achieve a common objective of greater good.

Cross-sectoral collaborations have happened swiftly and efficiencies have been derived to respond to the disaster. The pandemic is a great opportunity to learn from, to respond and to correct systemic wrongs. Having said that, we should not be waiting for a disaster to collaborate or respond since poverty is an ongoing and colossal disaster for the majority of humanity.

What, in your view, are the principal challenges involved in seeding and nurturing social entrepreneurship in India’s rural reaches. What works and what does not?

When we started Goonj back in 1998, Meenakshi (my co-founder, partner and wife) and I were not even aware of terms like social entrepreneurship, seeding and incubation. Did that stop us from reaching wherever we are right now? No, it didn’t.

Gradually, through various platforms and exposure, we understood the issues and the jargon. Everybody, whether an individual or an entity, has a list of things that work and those that don’t. What matters most is the will and intent to do good; summon that and things will fall in place.

“Development must include the welfare of the individual and the community, and this should be in rhythm with nature.”
If you had a wish list to improve India and its well-being, what would the three main points on it be?
One, I would want to see rural India produce, make and market for rural India. Two, I would want to see all development work being led by the dignity principle, meaning the poor should be included, mapped and counted for the contribution of their skills, efforts and resources. This is how their voice can be prioritised in any development work. Three, as a country we should allocate more resources to our villages and our farmers.

How have you been shaped by the experiences of your youth — of growing up in small-town India, of suffering what is a lifelong disability and of dealing with financial concerns?
My experiences are the experiences of a majority of lower middle-class people in this country. The challenges I faced took out the fear of ups and downs in life. Early on I came to accept them as part of life and work. I guess my understanding of the importance of dignity in a person’s and a family’s life, the struggle for little things and how that affects people — all of those insights have been seeded by my upbringing.

You have been described as a foodie who loves photography, travel and writing. How do you manage to find time for all of this?
I have merged all the four points you mention into my work with Goonj. Travelling across urban and rural India, with its wide variety of flavours, there is never a dull food day. I make it a point to enjoy local delicacies in every place that I visit for work. This is a ritual for me.

As for photography, the landscape of my beautiful country presents ample opportunities. Writing is what I struggle most with, particularly given the time crunch. But I try and make up for this with poetry (like the collection I am penning as part of the ‘Covidi’ collection). I guess the trick for me is to not see my life, work and hobbies as different facets — they are all part of my journey.
Paving the path to financial independence is the objective of a cooperative society in Bihar that counts 4,500 women among its members

Beena Devi’s big dream is to put her daughter through medical school. Presuming she makes the admission cut — and there’s every possibility she will — that means having the money ready to fund her future. Unlike so many in similar situations and from similarly stressed backgrounds, Beena has a friend to count on.

A native of Kumarpur village in Bihar’s Munger district, Ms Devi’s chosen benefactor is Sewa Bihar, a credit cooperative society with a complicated name and a simple mission. The Bihar Mahila Sewa Bachat Evam Sakh Swavalambi Sahkari Samiti is a credit cooperative promoted by Sewa Bharat. It is an associate organisation of the well-known Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), the Ahmedabad-based trade union that provides a voice to more than two million women working in the informal economy.

Established in 2012, the Sewa Bihar cooperative has an asset base of ₹80 million, representing the saving power of some 4,500 women engaged in farm labour, rural construction and small businesses such as vegetable vending. Spread across seven districts of Bihar, the cooperative is an informal savings and loan bank for women members from about 300 self-help groups (SHGs) in 90 villages.

Each SHG deposits the savings of its members, earns interest on these and has the option of borrowing a loan of up to four times the value of their deposits. The cooperative runs like a microfinance scheme and it highlights powerful development
themes: financial independence, inclusion and empowerment. Most importantly, it gives underprivileged women the chance to build monetary assets they can call their own.

In 2018, the cooperative approached the Tata Trusts to support much-needed training for their office-bearers and field workers so they could improve its work processes and productivity. The Trusts did not need much prompting to back the cause. “We have a long history of supporting SEWA and the Bihar cooperative initiative was aligned with our work in improving financial inclusion,” says programme officer Karthik Doraiswamy.

Training and skilling
The Trusts funded a year of training and this involved around 30 sessions for about 100 executives, supervisors and field workers of the Sewa Bihar cooperative. The skilling was all about ways and means of managing money better. The training, planned around the information and knowledge that the staff needed, covered data, documentation and cash-handling in order for them to better understand financial systems and bookkeeping.

Vitta saathis (field workers for finance) are the bedrock of the cooperative. This all-women brigade is responsible for getting more members into the cooperative, maintaining loan ledgers and managing credit recoveries. The last is critical. As Ms Devi puts it, “The cooperative will profit only if our loan recovery rate is good.”

The training has helped turn around the functioning of the cooperative. Perhaps more crucially, it has empowered women like Ms Devi to rise through the ranks and make a better life for themselves. Starting as a vitta saathi in Kumarpur, Ms Devi now heads the cooperative’s Bariarpur office. Her fear of computers is gone and that’s a big deal for her and others like her.

The capacity building sessions for Ms Devi and her vitta saathi peers focused

It’s finer with finance

Baby Kumari has come a long way — from being looked down upon for not being able to ‘produce a son’ to becoming financially independent and gaining a weighty measure of self-worth.

A vitta saathi (field worker for finance) posted at the Sewa Bihar cooperative’s Kharagpur branch in Munger district, Ms Kumari lives in Kathautiya village with her four daughters. As far as her family and community were concerned, that was four too many of one and none of the other, that much-sought-after son.

Ms Kumari was not ready to take it all lying down, and she realised soon enough that the road to redemption was paved with financial independence. She got going with a teaching job that paid ₹200 a month. The amount was paltry but it was the beginning of a journey that led Baby to join a self-help group (SHG) and, in due course, become its treasurer.

When the Sewa Bihar cooperative was formed in 2012, it started with just 150 women members. Ms Kumari played a big role in expanding the cooperative in the Kharagpur area, going all out to convince women to join the effort to get more financial leverage for their savings.

Today, from one SHG, the Kharagpur branch covers more than 50 clusters spanning a 30-km radius and including in excess of 3,000 members. Ms Kumari, meanwhile, has gone on to manage the accounts of some 700 members even as she has turned into an icon for women’s empowerment in the area. ■
Sangita had never worked on a computer previously. That has changed and she is now a more capable organiser as well, thanks to the soft-skills training she has received in leadership, conflict resolution, etc.

The training project had to navigate a host of road blocks. For one, it had to be held in different districts to allow more field workers to participate. That raised safety and security issues as some of these districts are in the grip of what are known as Maoist insurgencies (in one tense encounter, training team members had a tough time convincing a police party they were not Maoists).

The Sewa Bihar cooperative has, in no small part due to the training initiative, been transformed from a loosely managed NGO to a smoothly functioning enterprise that gives poor rural women a stronger foothold in the financial system. That translates into improved prospects for Beena, Sangita and their thousands of fellow travellers.

The Tata Trusts-funded training has helped make Sewa Bihar members more process-oriented and better managers on documentation processes such as maintaining loan ledgers and defaulter reports, and why it is essential to keep the loan registers up-to-date. The official records of member dues are now reliable, supervisors have learned to check each vitta saathi’s entry, and there has been a reduction in errors of over 60% in documenting daily collections.

Making the system robust
The team has also learnt cash and loan management. The cash collected gets recorded and deposited in the bank the same day, data entry and data management have become routine and reliable, and loan defaulters are tracked rigorously. As a result, the defaulter percentage has come down from over 10% in 2018 to about 4% in June 2019.

The overall effort has led to a significant increase in the Sewa Bihar cooperative’s operational efficiency. There have been other positives too, as Sangita Devi can attest. In charge of the cooperative’s head office in Munger, Sangita had never worked on a computer previously. That has changed and she is now a more capable organiser as well, thanks to the soft-skills training she has received in leadership, conflict resolution, etc.

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By Gayatri Kamath
Food is the fuel

More than 28,000 school-going children from Maharashtra’s tribal belt are getting their fill of nutrition, thanks to the ‘Annapurna Central Kitchens’ programme

“I want to be a policeman,” says Vikas Shid with all the confidence his 15-year-old self can muster. The son of a rice-farming couple in Nashik’s Shenwad village, part of Maharashtra’s tribal belt, Vikas is a first-generation learner who has recently cleared his Standard X exams. Chances are he will clear whatever other tests the future may hold to fulfil his ambition, and there’s a not-so-obvious reason for that.

Unlike millions of children near about his age and from his milieu, Vikas is healthy and strong. This has much to do with him being shielded through his childhood years from malnutrition and anaemia, common afflictions in the region he calls home. The credit for that goes to the regular and nutritious meals served at his school under the ‘Annapurna Central Kitchens’ programme.

The programme was started in September 2015 by the Tata Trusts and the Maharashtra government’s Tribal Development Department (TDD). Under it, two large kitchens were set up at Mundhegaon in Nashik district and Kambalgaon in Palghar.

The Trusts manage these kitchens, which cook and deliver four meals a day to more than 28,000 students in 67 government-run residential schools in Nashik and Palghar. A first-of-its-kind nutrition delivery model that works across a large canvas, the initiative has improved the health and prospects of...
numerous children in rural, and mainly tribal, Maharashtra.

Spanning a combined area of nearly 20,000sqft and run by an army of 360 people working in shifts, the kitchens have on their menu rice, chapatis, lentils, vegetable curries and snacks. These wholesome meals are delivered, piping hot, by 48 trucks to schools as far as 90km away from the centres.

Adequate nutrition is at the heart of the project. “Children in Maharashtra’s tribal regions are plagued by problems such as anaemia, malnutrition, stunting and wasting,” says programme manager Rajat Shastri. “There was immense scope to improve the nutrition delivery model in these government schools. What we have ensured is that the food served is high quality, wholesome and nutritious.”

‘Ensuring the three Hs’
The kitchens are jointly funded by the government and the Tata Trusts. However, as the techno-managerial partners, the Trusts are responsible for facility design, equipment and the running of the centres. The initiative’s three goals are simple: provide high-quality meals to students; ensure the highest levels of food safety and hygiene; and achieve financial viability through optimal use of TDD funds.

Five years on, the central kitchen programme has excelled on all these parameters. Alongside improvements in health outcomes and an increase in number of children partaking of the meals, the project has got its economics right.

The kitchens come under the Trusts’ wider, pan-India nutrition endeavour. That government bodies and agencies need help on this front is not in doubt. According to the 2016 National Family Health Survey, 54% of children under five years of age in Maharashtra were anaemic, 34% showed signs of stunting and 26% were underweight for their age. The numbers are higher than

Sources: St John’s Research Institute, Government of Maharashtra
the national average on nutrition and worse among the state’s tribal communities.

Malnutrition impacts development and has lifelong implications. A 2007 study by Lancet found that adults who were undernourished as children earn 20% less than those who were not. Malnutrition also hurts the economy, with one survey estimating that it eats away nearly 4% of India’s GDP every year.

Despite being one of the country’s wealthiest states, Maharashtra continues to grapple with both malnutrition and education challenges. The state’s tribal regions suffer the most on these counts, and that despite an increase in school enrolments and a reduction in dropout rates among tribal students. The Annapurna effort is aimed at helping improve the situation.

“Before the kitchens started, the bulk of complaints from students and parents used to be about food quality and hygiene, not about education,” says Saurabh Katiyar, a project officer with the State Tribal Commissionerate who oversaw the initiative until recently. “Today those complaints are down to almost zero. That, for me, is the biggest sign of the programme’s success.”

It is no exaggeration to say that good food is the key to keeping children from India’s backward regions in school. Getting this right is never a given. Damodar Bond, a father of three school-going kids from Saware Pachudhara village, Palghar, recalls a time when the breakfast served to students comprised khadi shakkar (rock sugar) and peanuts. “Now they get juice, milk and protein-rich foods,” he says. “The food is so good that most families in our village are waiting for the schools to reopen after the lockdown.”

Harnessing the best

The good food mandate has been factored into the design of the central kitchens programme, and so is scale. The Kambalgaon and Mundhegaon kitchens cover about 9,500 sq ft each and they have, among other equipment, enormous steam-based cauldrons, water filters, boilers and chapati-making machines. Technical and training assistance was provided by former project partner Akshaya Patra, an organisation that feeds some 1.8 million children daily in different parts of India.

Running the kitchens is a team game, given the constant pressure of preparing and delivering more than 80,000 nutritious meals a day. Each of the kitchens has some 180 people, including 10 government-appointed supervisors. The first shift begins at 2 am, and trucks laden with breakfast packages leave for schools at 6.30 am. The routine happens thrice a day.

Hygiene and quality are paramount. The kitchens follow mandated food and

Besides improving health, Annapurna’s food has also improved the mental well-being of students.
operational safety standards, with everything from raw materials and cooked food to filtered water being checked at multiple stages. Insulated and sealed delivery vehicles are used to maintain food temperature and to avoid any external touchpoints while in transit.

Besides safety, ensuring nutritional value, taste and variety are important. Tribal families traditionally consume rice, lentils, leafy vegetables and fish. Milk, eggs and fruits are often absent from their diet. Accordingly, nutrition experts from the Trusts designed the central kitchens’ menu to incorporate the right proportions of nutrients, including proteins, minerals and vitamins. Care is constantly taken to ensure that the menu is wholesome and diverse, and special food items are introduced on festivals and other important occasions.

Besides healthier bodies, Annapurna’s good food way has had a perceptible effect on the mental well-being of students. “Five years ago, the majority of schools in the region achieved a pass percentage of 60-70% in the board exams. This year, most have achieved over 90% and 11 of the schools we cater to have got 100% results,” says Yogesh Choudhari, a supervisor at the Kambalgaon centre.

The next phase of the programme is going to be critical. The Trusts will be handing over the running of the two kitchens to TDD shortly and that means the all-important sustainability equation will come into focus. Meanwhile, the Trusts have drafted a plan to set up a similar operation in tribal-dominated Gadchiroli district in eastern Maharashtra.

With its impressive track record, the central kitchens programme has reaffirmed the potential of nutrition-led interventions to deliver long-lasting and positive change at the grassroots.

By Nikhil Menon
The villagers of Kondapalli in rural Andhra Pradesh have found a new way to preserve their centuries-old tradition and enhance their incomes by selling toys online.

Striking colours and vibrant hues are part and parcel of Panuganti Lalitha Kumari’s everyday work routine, and now there is a bit more of both in her life as well.

The 48-year-old from Kondapalli village in Andhra Pradesh’s Krishna district is a toymaker, one of few keeping alive a 400-year-old tradition of making wooden toys by hand. The reason for her cheer is simply down to her self-help group (SHG) securing an additional source of income from their undervalued craft.

Ms Lalitha’s SHG has just received orders for toys worth ₹28,000. The figure may seem meagre but the route it has come through — by way of an e-commerce site — and the potential for further gains this points to are no small comfort, for the artisans involved in the endeavour.

What Ms Lalitha and her toymaker mates are up against sets the context for their struggle to stay afloat. The influx of modern, mainly plastic toys from abroad, especially from China, has sounded the death knell for artisan communities in India that craft handmade toys. These people needed support and that has now been forthcoming.

The Andhra Pradesh government has backed the Kondapalli toymakers by granting their unique craft a GI
(geographical indication) tag. That was encouraging but far from enough. Things got better two years back when an e-commerce platform — launched by the Tata Trusts in association with the Andhra Pradesh government’s Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) — began providing a more fruitful avenue for the artisans to enhance their income.

Launched in December 2018, the eBharathi platform aims to empower rural entrepreneurs by facilitating access to online markets and developing sustainable sources of income. “Our objective was to create a scalable and sustainable model that enables SHGs to list their products online and maximise sales,” says Yogeeshwar Reddy, a programme officer with the Trusts.

Connecting rural entrepreneurship and the handicrafts sector, which employs nearly seven million people in India, made sense. The eBharathi platform has shown why by delivering multiple benefits. It has enabled local artisans to explore newer markets, helped break the stranglehold of manipulative middlemen, and increased the visibility of handcrafted products.

The handicrafts and handloom offerings on the platform are marked by high levels of skill, attention to detail and originality. These have fuelled demand but not enough to benefit the artisans to any great extent. A big problem here is access to markets.

For centuries, Kondapalli’s artisans have relied on intermediaries, more often than not large shop owners in their village, to sell their handicrafts. This saved the artisans the hassle of finding buyers or vending their wares. It also left them open to exploitation. The shop owners purchase the toys at very low prices and sell these for much more, in Kondapalli itself and in places such as Hyderabad and Bengaluru.

The other challenge has been developing scale. Kondapalli toys are made by individual artisan families in which young and the old work together. Collaboration with other families is rare and that, while fostering creativity, put a lid on scale and volumes, resulting in disadvantages in marketing. Mobilising the artisans through SHGs has been the chosen way to get
Pushpa Gade’s home in Kondapalli is filled with toys, all of them of her family’s making. Many of these represent Hindu mythological characters and there are also animals, birds, depictions of rural life and dancing figures. Enough, in fact, to drive a child — and a few adults, maybe — to distraction.

Kondapalli toys are an integral part of the Dusshera and Sankranthi festivals in Andhra Pradesh. Rows upon rows of these toys are ceremoniously displayed as part of the celebrations (called Bommala Kollu).

What stays hidden is the effort that goes into making such finely crafted products.

The crafting of toys is a family business in Kondapalli. Men handle the woodcutting and carving. The more delicate aspects of the process are the preserve of women. The skills needed for the task are handed down from generation to generation, and the schooling begins at a young age. Ms Gade, for instance, began making toys at age seven. “Special toys need small fingers to carve and craft,” she explains.

The toys are made from a soft wood known as Tella Poniki. Large blocks of it are carved into rough shapes and each part of the toy is then crafted separately. The pieces are assembled using makku (a paste made of tamarind seed powder and sawdust).

The next step involves colouring with oil, water colours or vegetable dyes. The colours come almost entirely from natural materials: yellow from dried marigolds, deep red from pomegranates and peach from palm leaves. Some artisans use enamel paints to make the colours more intense.

Despite the hardships involved and the challenges of finding a fair price for their products, the artisans remain passionate about preserving the centuries-old craft. “It would be a shame if we allowed this tradition to die. We have to preserve it at any cost,” says Panuganti Lalitha Kumari, a Kondapalli artisan who is part of a self-help group.

Handy skills

The eBharathi platform has helped artisans like Pushpa Gade augment their income and preserve their craft.
around the handicap.

The power of the collective has ensured better pricing for the toys and the market linkage part has been eased by the e-commerce site, which has provided an open and transparent sales channel. Getting Kondapalli’s artisans to embrace the e-platform idea has been a challenge, though, and that is where the Tata Trusts team has had to bring its rural entrepreneurship experience to bear.

Training was a key element, with the SHGs being educated on various aspects of digital selling and more. They were taught about pricing, packaging, labelling, branding and promotion. Towards this end, Hyderabad-based Kalgudi, a network interaction platform with experience in collaborative rural e-commerce models, was roped in as technical consultant.

Technology proved to be a daunting challenge for the Kondapalli artisans, many of whom are illiterate and lack knowledge about smartphones, a prerequisite to access e-commerce platforms such as eBharathi. Kalgudi stepped up with help here, setting up an SMS-based communication mechanism to ensure that artisans using lower-end mobile phones did not miss out on sales orders.

The efforts have paid off over time. Ms Lalitha and her SHG mates now list their products on eBharathi and, most recently, they received 38 orders. The eBharathi platform has helped the artisans access new markets in Bengaluru and Hyderabad and also in Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi. There are now three Kondapalli SHGs that sell online.

As with communities around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have affected the lives of Kondapalli’s artisans. Sales stopped completely in compliance with government guidelines but the easing of restrictions has seen normal service resume, with the platform receiving orders ranging between ₹10,000 and ₹15,000 every day.

Programmed for benefits

It’s not just the Kondapalli artisans that have benefitted through eBharathi. The platform serves as a sales avenue for a spectrum of Andhra Pradesh’s small entrepreneurs. Among the products marketed through it are Atreyapuram Pootharekulu (a sweet delicacy), traditional woven sarees, Kalamkari hand-dyed paintings and showpieces crafted from Etikoppaka wood.

The platform has generated more than ₹4 million in sales through over 1,900 online orders for handicraft and handloom artisans. And the success has been noticed (the Odisha government plans to launch a similar platform, to be called Mission Shakti, to improve the lives and incomes of the state’s artisans).

The story of eBharathi shows how technology can change the lives of India’s artisans for the better, while helping preserve the country’s rich legacy of handicrafts. For Kondapalli’s toymakers, the takeaway is less lofty and a lot more immediate — their skills, and they themselves, have found a way to survive.

By Samod Sarangan
Riding the weaves

Handloom artisans laid low by the lockdown rose to the challenge by understanding and tapping the power of digital to reach far-flung customers

I
tishree Sur has soared from despondency to delight in what seems like the blink of an eye, and she has the wonders of digital media, not least, to thank for it.

An artisan from Gopalpur in Odisha who makes a living from weaving sarees and dupattas (stoles) in the famous Odiya traditions of Tussar and Gheecha, Ms Sur was pushed to the brink when Covid-19 struck. The pandemic-induced lockdown hit India’s handloom sector hard and Ms Sur’s income looked set to vanish. Instead, the enterprising 37-year-old has managed to sell products worth ₹1.1 million in seven months.

Ms Sur and her family worked together to upgrade their merchandise, clicked photos of these on smartphones and, importantly, harnessed the power of digital — social media, WhatsApp and email — to connect with customers. Bringing it all together, Ms Sur and 31 other weaver entrepreneurs have been nurtured through Antaran — the craft-based livelihoods programme of the Tata Trusts.

Antaran Artisan Connect is the medium through which Ms Sur and her compatriots have found a lifeline, and more, to get ahead in these trying times. The initiative is part of a wider effort by Antaran to help India’s handloom artisans develop entrepreneurial skills and find a pathway to different marketplaces.

Antaran strives to strengthen the craft ecosystem in the country, revive handloom textile processes that use natural fibres,
hand-spun yarn and natural dyes, and reinterpret traditional weave designs to
make them alluring for global markets.

Incubation centres and design and entrepreneurial education for artisans are
crucial components of the Antaran project, which has empowered 956 weavers till date
in six clusters across four states: Kamrup and Nalbari in Assam, Dimapur in
Nagaland, Gopalpur and Maniabandha in Odisha, and Venkatgiri in Andhra Pradesh.

The artisan connect campaign has been particularly striking for what’s been
achieved. It has facilitated the sale of products worth about ₹10 million. Beyond
that, the Antaran intervention has benefitted 956 artisans, who have generated business in
excess of ₹30 million by working with business buyers on designer collections and
through retail exhibitions in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai, and even
a trade fair in faraway Paris as well.

The digital thrust and prepaid orders paved the way for Ms Sur and other artisan
entrepreneurs to beat back the lockdown blues and seek out customers. The idea
stemmed from concerns that the artisans themselves voiced. They had stocks but were
unable to supply to buyers. This would affect their income, along with that of their
associate weavers, mostly daily earners.

**Weaving a support framework**
The second issue was lack of new orders as marketplaces were shut. However, there was
no question of living off monetary support or charitable donations. The artisans were
clear that they wanted to earn through their work. That gave rise to the digital campaign,
creating a direct link between artisan entrepreneurs and customers — including
loyal buyers from before the lockdown, and Tata group employees among others.

The artisans assessed their stock and had it photographed. There was a hook. The
artisans offered their products at wholesale rates to deliver greater value for retail
customers in exchange for their support in the form of advance payments.

Details got cemented and a website — www.antaranartisanconnect.in — was
launched to increase accessibility and make it convenient for customers to select and
order. The promise was that their purchases would be despatched as soon as the
lockdown was lifted.

Once the website went live, the team designed a simple flyer about the initiative
and shared it through WhatsApp. What happened after that was beyond everyone’s
expectation.

“People loved the idea of being able to support artisans and also get good quality
products in the process,” says Sharda Gautam, who heads the crafts programme at
the Tata Trusts. “They began sharing the
WhatsApp link about the campaign within their circles and it went viral.”

The positive response was a mood booster and a money maker for the artisans. As for customers, those who knew about Antaran and the artisans had no doubts. Mumbai-based Sheran Mehra, the chief brand officer at Tata Digital, is one of them. “I first met some of these artisans when Antaran hosted an exhibition in Mumbai,” she says. “Right from product curation to personal interaction, I enjoyed the experience of buying directly from them. During the lockdown, I ordered products from all the Antaran clusters.”

Within weeks of launch, Antaran Artisan Connect accomplished what it had set out to do, and more. Besides meeting the immediate financial needs of the artisans, the campaign created wider awareness of the work of the artisans under the craft-based livelihood programme of Tata Trusts and helped them build a bigger customer base.

Less visible but vital in the circumstances has been the role the initiative has played in sustaining weaving traditions in the clusters that Antaran is working. As Mr Gautam explains, artisans belong to the informal sector and operate with low working capital, which is why selling their products, quickly and at a good price, is critical for survival.

“Weavers lack access to credit from financial institutions to help them tide over any crisis, and private moneylenders charge a hefty interest,” says Mr Gautam. “In such a scenario, the entire weaving ecosystem in economically marginalised clusters could collapse. That’s why the liquidity and movement of stock has been a huge relief for the artisans.”

The process hasn’t been without its set of road blocks, though. For most artisans, it was a challenge to manage the swift shift to digital marketing — despite the training they had received at Antaran’s incubation
and design centres. Unreliable internet connections in their rural homesteads made matters worse.

Fortunately, most of them were able to climb aboard the digital bandwagon. From promoting their brands and products on social media platforms to hashtagging, from interacting with customers on messaging apps to handling online transfers, the artisans have embraced the new way of selling their products.

Other facets of the education imparted by the Antaran team, including business management, communication and presentation skills, and brand building, came in handy for the artisans. “This has been a litmus test of the training the artisans received and we have seen a positive response from them,” adds Mr Gautam.

The lockdown, though adverse for the entire handloom industry, also presented an opportunity for the artisans to redefine their future. They have recast their growth plans and identified new marketing avenues for the days ahead. Fresh designs have been fashioned and themes for more than 40 new collections planned across the clusters during the lockdown period.

The next step for Antaran and its artisans is an app for business development called Craft Xchange, which will directly connect artisans with buyers. Artisans will be able to showcase their work under their own labels and customers can request customised designs.

While Craft Xchange is the immediate goal, the overarching objective of Antaran remains unchanged: to further transform the six weaving clusters by creating entrepreneur-led microenterprises across each part of the value chain. That should add muscle to the effort of making the weaving practice a viable livelihood means for traditional artisans.

By Priyanka Hosangadi
Out of the woods

Vilified and marginalised from British colonial times, West Bengal’s Kheria Sabar tribe needs help — and has found some

B atasi Sabar, a 40-year-old from the Kheria Sabar tribal community of West Bengal, lost her farm-labour job during the lockdown. To survive, she went back to some of the hunter-gatherer ways of her people. “I started collecting food and wood from the forest,” says Ms Sabar, a single mother of three from Balakdi village in Purulia district. “The wood brooms I make and sell are my only source of income now.”

The forest has been the traditional habitat and provider of resources for the Kheria Sabars for centuries, but that is changing, the effects of the pandemic notwithstanding. Lending a hand in making such change possible is a Tata Trusts-funded field action project called TANDA (or Towards Advocacy, Networking and Developmental Action).

Denotified and nomadic tribes (DNT-NTs), the Kheria Sabars among them, are the target beneficiary group of the project, which comes under the umbrella of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Launched in 2017, the initiative is focused on addressing the injustices perpetrated against DNT-NTs, right from the British colonial era down to the present day.

Reaching the fruits of participative governance to these historically oppressed communities is a pivotal tenet of TANDA. The Covid-19 crisis highlights the most recent example of how this is done. Thanks to the project, some 2,500 Kheria Sabar families have received rations through the government’s public distribution network.

As with most DNT-NTs, the Kheria Sabars lead a stigmatised existence. Painted in unfair light and largely forgotten by policymakers, they live on the fringes of a system that, until recently, branded them as
a community of dacoits and robbers (see Shadow people on page 62).

“Traditionally, we have been hunters,” explains Kharu Sabar, a 60-year-old from Kuda village in Purulia. “We began settling down after our forefathers were kicked out of the forest. That’s why most Sabars have no land papers. We were given barren, stony land where it is difficult to grow crops. That, and the ‘criminal’ tag, have forced many of us to migrate for daily-wage work.”

The Sabars’ lack of awareness about caste certificates, Aadhar cards, etc has denied them access to government schemes designed specifically for them. That explains one of TANDA’s key goals: ‘governance activation’, which is all about getting the community their rightful entitlements. Livelihood assistance and legal counselling, essential, given the administrative prejudices they suffer, are also part of the project’s goals.

Poverty and marginalisation
The deprivation the Sabars suffer is plainly evident. Malnutrition is rampant, school dropout rates are high and alcoholism is widespread, especially among the community’s youth. “The last is due to a lack of jobs,” says Mayank Sinha, TANDA’s project coordinator and a member of the National Alliance Group for Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, an advocacy group.

An understanding of these ground realities has defined TANDA’s interventions, one of the most important of which is implementing the government-funded Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in the district.

Aimed at preschool children, ICDS addresses malnutrition on a nationwide scale. In Purulia’s tribal hamlets back in 2017, the anganwadis (childcare centres) run through the programme were plagued by problems: irregular timings, staff absenteeism, gaps in food allocation, and incorrect reporting of child malnutrition data. Lack of community awareness worsened the situation.

The TANDA team laboured to get anganwadi workers on their side. “We trained the teachers to identify the causes and effects of malnutrition,” says Mr Sinha. “To soften any resistance, we
helped the staff by supplying vegetables from specially set up kitchen gardens. We also got locals to clean up the premises.”

To involve the community, the team formed and trained groups of mothers (called ‘mata sanghas’). Saraswati Sabar, 27, is one of those mothers. “We traditionally eat rice and water, sometimes with vegetables foraged from the forest,” she says. “We knew nothing about child malnourishment till we were trained and told about the food we could get at the anganwadis.”

TANDA’s efforts and the pressure exerted by the mothers have improved both the functioning of the anganwadis and the quality and quantity of food provided there. “Within two-and-a-half months of the intervention, many children improved from being ‘severely malnourished’ to ‘moderately malnourished’,” says Prasanta Rakshit, a member of the Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, TANDA’s local partner.

Meanwhile, to get older children into the formal schooling system, TANDA launched 30 community learning centres in 10 villages. Nearly 700 children, all of them first-generation learners, have thus far studied at the centres, which teach them language and maths. The intent is to get these children into age-appropriate standards in school.

The project has, additionally, delivered alternative livelihood options to Kheria Sabar families. This was crucial for two reasons: to reduce the need for seasonal migration towards brick-making and agricultural work elsewhere — a direct consequence of the low levels of land ownership among Sabars — and to enable them to find gainful employment without facing discrimination and the stigma of criminality.

Goat and fish farming and handicrafts have been the go-to livelihood options created for the community.

Kuda village was where the goat farming pilot project was launched. TANDA delivered training and financial
**Shadow people**

Denotified (DNT), nomadic (NT) and semi-nomadic tribes (SNTs) collectively comprise just under 10% of India’s population. Despite that, these communities — among them pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, nomads, entertainers and religious performers — remain largely invisible and mostly unheard in mainstream discourse.

Denotified tribes have been classified as such since 1952, when a racist British-era law that condemned them as ‘criminal tribes’ was dumped. The sad reality, though, is that nearly 70 years on DNT-NT-SNTs are still among India’s most marginalised groups of citizens, struggling on human development indices and frequently targeted under the stringent Habitual Offenders Act.

The bigotry these tribes encounter runs deep and there are multiple factors adding to their distress: rapid urbanisation, tighter wildlife regulations, begging and forestry laws, and lack of enumeration and policymaking by successive governments. Many DNT-NT-SNTs are forced to take up illegal livelihoods merely to survive.

Police action against DNT-NT-SNTs often tends to be presumptive and harsh. The Kheria Sabars, for instance, are rounded up in dacoity and robbery cases, as are the Pardhis of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The Chharas of Gujarat, even educated ones, are harassed on suspicion of bootlegging. The Nat and Bedia tribeswomen of northern India are regularly jailed for prostitution.

In 2019, the central government set up a Development and Welfare Board for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities. Also in the same year, a committee under NITI Aayog, the Indian government think tank, was set up to identify such communities. But it’s going to take more than committees and boards to lift these communities out of obscurity and deprivation.

**Change gathers pace**

Governmental backing has been critical in putting TANDA’s endeavours, particularly in the livelihoods space, on the road to sustainability. “Our livelihood interventions have helped prevent unsafe migration and the exploitation of Sabars, reduced their socioeconomic vulnerability, and prevented crimes,” says Mangala Honawar, a programme manager with the Tata Trusts.

The project also works with the local police and judiciary to close cases where Kheria Sabars are falsely accused (at last count, around 200 documented cases are pending against community members). Meanwhile, the team’s legal counsellors pitch in to settle, out of court, land and payment disputes involving Sabars.

TANDA’s biggest victory has been in enlisting the Sabars to participate actively in improving their collective well-being. It’s a blueprint with plenty of lessons on how to rehabilitate India’s most marginalised DNT-NT communities.

By Nikhil Menon
FLOATING FEELING

The floating huts of Loktak lake in Manipur’s Bishnupur district are more than picturesque. Simple structures made of natural materials, they float on what the locals call *phumdi* (a mass of matted vegetation, organic debris and soil) at the edge of the lake. These huts have served as traditional homes for the local fishing community. The indigenous way of life is changing, with income from fishing dropping and fisherfolk struggling to make a living. Enter tourism. The locals decided to convert their huts into homestays and offer a unique staying experience for the many tourists and backpackers who visit Loktak lake. The Tata Trusts have supported these new entrepreneurs with solar energy solutions for the floating beauties.

The tourism initiative has ensured a sustainable source of income for the local residents.
Small country boats are the only means of transport to reach the huts.
Before the solar project got underway, homestay owners used kerosene lamps for lighting purposes. The off-grid solar lighting system is ideal for residents who have made the islands their homes and remain cut off from land.
A 40Wp solar system is installed on the roof of the floating hut. The Centre for microFinance, an associate organisation of the Tata Trusts, provides technical support and services for the initiative.
Solar panels installed on the rooftops of the floating huts provide power to the floating huts. The supply is sufficient for the local weaving centre where Lolini Devi Laishram (below) crafts a traditional attire called Rani Phee.
‘Education is the only way to end poverty’

Central to the tenet that preoccupies Shaheen Mistri’s mindscape — underprivileged children and their education — is the often overlooked need to hear the voices that matter most. “We must understand the importance of working with our children and not just for them, listening sincerely to them and including them in dialogue and discourse,” says the 49-year-old educator.

Ms Mistri has done more than her share of working with, and listening to, children while devoting herself to the cause of equity in education, especially for those on the fringes. In 1991, she seeded what has grown into the Akanksha Foundation, a nonprofit
What do you make of the recently unveiled NEP? How far will it go in plugging the many gaps in India’s education system?

NEP’s aspirational definition of an excellent education matches so much of what we believe in. There is the reaffirmation that curricula and assessment must be holistic, that all children must have a foundation of literacy and numeracy, that school culture matters, and that teachers are all important.

However, there are certain facets that NEP seems to have overlooked. In the current climate, we need to be doing more to empower our children with digital knowledge. While 21st-century skills are mentioned in the curriculum section, it isn’t clear which skills will be focused on and how. Furthermore, this new framework continues to see students as the recipients of education and not equal partners in driving their own education and the education of others.

By not defining the unique role that students have in helping us understand, and be a partner in, the purpose, content and delivery of education, NEP has missed a huge learning and impact opportunity. More student voices are needed in governance structures. Given that students have the least power in the system, ensuring they feel safe to raise their voice at every level — from school management committees to participation in policy — is crucial.

We need greater emphasis on creating a talent pipeline for all levels of the education system to ensure high-quality implementation of the policy in innovative ways. We must make child rights and protection more prominent and devote a full section of the report to this.

It is vital to mandate social workers and counsellors in the headcount
of schools, while including courses on mental and physical health in all schools. Teacher reform and education, innovation, and the structure of schools are areas that haven’t seen much coverage in NEP but are necessary for the delivery of high-quality education.

**This new policy is the third such attempt to define and implement a countrywide education system, and it has to contend with a similar set of infrastructure and resource challenges. Can it do better where the previous two fell short?**

Yes, it can do better. Many of the areas the policy focuses on are essential and, with proper implementation, change can be brought about. But if we hope to bring about long-lasting change, we must understand the importance of working with our children and not just for them, listening sincerely to them and including them in dialogue and discourse, especially on issues that affect them and which they are central to.

Gaps in leadership also need to be filled at the earliest and with the utmost care, precision and rigour. If the areas that aren’t covered in NEP are worked upon and included, then there is no reason why it won’t yield better results than the first two such attempts, even if we have similar infrastructure and resource challenges.

**The Covid-19 outbreak has brought digital learning into the light like never before. What are the advantages here? What about the many issues that this throws up in a country such as ours?**

The Covid-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity to reimagine education and to create a new structure that can be a true equaliser for all. Given that the internet is the only mode through which education will be imparted in the near future, children now have the opportunity to develop skills they perhaps could not have previously: IT skills, coding and learning a language, for example. The current situation is resulting in both educators and children becoming more creative to ensure that learning doesn’t stop.

But given how the majority in India live, I do feel that digital learning throws up issues that far outnumber any advantages. Most of our children do not have access to a stable internet connection or a device that is solely theirs. Additionally, in the most marginalised sections, there are few or no literate family members, parents and siblings often share a phone, and the atmosphere at home is frequently unconducive to learning.

The feeling of connectedness and being a part of something that physical classrooms offer is lost. This is hard to replicate online. Also, with the advent of virtual education, many families are being pressured to buy devices they can’t afford, just so their children may continue to learn. Meanwhile, there are children who are undergoing social and emotional trauma from their experiences with the pandemic and the lockdowns. Lastly, it is hard to measure progress in children from a distance. The challenges our teachers face today are steep.

“If we want creative, free and assertive adults, then we must encourage our children to think freely, to imagine and to do.”
India needs driven, passionate educators who can enable children to be the best they can be.

The Akanksha Foundation, which you set up, has been involved with enabling children from low-income families realise their potential. What’s critical in social uplift programmes of this kind? In the decades I have spent working in education, what has become abundantly clear is that this is a sector that needs caring adults in the service of children. We need to have driven, passionate people leading classrooms — whether physical or virtual — educators who can motivate, inspire and enable our children to be the best they can be.

If we want creative, free and assertive adults, then we must encourage our children to think freely, to imagine and to do. If we want strong voices, we should work to amplify the views of students. We must — and I cannot stress this enough — engage in a dialogue with our children rather than talk at them. We should include them in issues that affect them and work with them to find solutions.

How has your experience with Teach For India been like? What have you and your team learned from the effort?

Our mission is to build a movement of leaders to eliminate educational inequity. This movement has, with each passing year, grown and become stronger. In order to build this community of leaders, Teach For India has developed a two-part programme for change.

My time with Teach For India has shown me that people care deeply, about one another and about the future of this country and its citizens. While it may be hard to see, things have improved and, with the kind of organisations that are working in the education sector now, things will improve further still. The road ahead may be long but the task isn’t impossible. We will get to the finish line, one step at a time, one child at a time.

How can philanthropies and NGOs best help in improving education outcomes, particularly at the school-going stage?

If we want people to come out of poverty, to have the opportunities and platforms to put themselves and their families on the pathway to
a better life, then a good education is a necessity. This is the only way to end generational poverty. Philanthropists and corporations need to continue giving to organisations that are working in the field of education, particularly now when there is a heightened need to put gadgets in the hands of our children as we attempt to bridge the digital divide.

**You spent the first 18 years of your life growing up outside India. What sparked your interest in addressing the inequities bedevilling the country’s education system?**

I have always believed that a child’s socioeconomic background should not play a role in the kind of education he or she receives. Every single child has the right to a quality education and should be empowered and be given the means to change the life they were born into.

There are so many bright and talented children who never get the chance to explore their full potential; too many in fact, a reality I first observed when I started teaching children while I was in college. Somewhere deep inside me there was the desire to change that.

**You have been described as an “education warrior”. How much fighting have you had to do?**

Well, I wouldn’t term it as fighting, but yes, it has been a long road, with much joy along the way. The team that I work with across the country, our fellows and alumni, have made this a wonderful journey.

There have been challenges along the way, some harder than others, but then again it isn’t easy to change whole systems that have existed for decades. The fight is tough — and well worth it.
Partnerships with a variety of entities, most importantly the government, underpin the success of a plethora of social development programmes

Covid-19 has demonstrated in no uncertain terms that the success or failure of any endeavour to tackle a calamity — or even bridge substantive socioeconomic gaps — depends largely on the will and ability of multiple stakeholders to come together. No government in any country could have countered the pandemic on its own. Citizens and civil society organisations, along with others, have played an invaluable role here by leveraging their engagement with communities.

According to the Indian government’s Economic Survey 2019-20, the country’s social sector expenditure is 7.7% of its GDP, and this encompasses education, public health, sanitation, labour welfare and a lot more. This may not be enough.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific reckons that India needs to spend greater than 10% of its GDP to meet the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (the figure was arrived at prior to the pandemic). Given that the government’s resources and capacities are inadequate to cover the needs of social development in the country, and with the situation being exacerbated by the coronavirus outbreak, there is no questioning the necessity of garnering funds and capabilities from other avenues.

That’s where resources generated through the corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework and through public-private partnership models can help plug the gap. In the context, there is no understating the importance of goal 17 in the SDGs — partnerships. Covid-19 has, if further evidence was needed, validated how crucial this aspect is in realising India’s social development objectives.

SDG 17 does not stand alone. Inherent
to its nature is the ability to bind together the other 16 SDGs with five critical components: finance, capacity building, systemic issues, technology and trade. It’s a collaboration equation that delivers substantial dividends.

The partnership agenda has over time been embedded in the Tata Trusts’ efforts in the social development sphere. The Trusts have focused, particularly in the last couple of years, on forging partnerships with entities who bring in monetary or non-monetary resources — technology, subject-matter knowledge, research skills, etc — to efficiently deploy sustainable and high-impact solutions through the combined, and often complementary, expertise of multiple partners.

The Trusts have been increasingly adopting a systems approach to amplify the impact of initiatives in the communities they serve. They do this by layering multiple programmes in a specific geography. That has resulted in projects in livelihoods, nutrition, healthcare, education and more being implemented in a holistic manner to better serve underprivileged communities.

Partnerships enable the augmentation of systemic solutions by facilitating the convening of several stakeholders to utilise the strengths of the different partners. For instance, Bharat Petroleum and the NSE Foundation have collaborated with the Trusts to support multi-themed interventions in Gadchiroli and Nandurbar districts of Maharashtra.

**Collaboration for impact**

Similarly, the Trusts have partnered the Axis Bank Foundation to help marginalised tribal communities in Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Rajasthan, and IndusInd Bank to support various social uplift programmes in Odisha and Assam. These partnerships exemplify a collaborative approach to making an impact in regions that have been neglected for decades.

Corporate entities have traditionally had a mandate to support development initiatives in the vicinity of their areas of operation, be it offices, manufacturing facilities, mines or raw material sources. The bold and progressive among such entities have begun to look beyond this limited approach, and they have found a

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A Tata Trusts supported education initiative in Karnataka has led to improved learning outcomes; partnerships have enabled the Tata Trusts to augment systemic solutions by utilising the strengths of different partners.
solid partner in the Tata Trusts.

The track record and pedigree of the Tata Trusts in the development sector have prompted some companies to come forward and direct their resources to under-invested regions like Northeast India. For example, Trent has tied up with the Trusts to back development programmes in Mizoram, while Titan has joined hands with the Trusts on multiple interventions in Uttarakhand and elsewhere.

The Tata Trusts have always been pioneers in taking up innovative and large-scale initiatives. Partnerships play a vital role in such endeavours. Alongside monetary collaborations with funding organisations, the Trusts have emphasised the building of capabilities in beneficiary communities as well as their own teams. That’s how five women beneficiaries from the livelihoods initiative in the Northeast have made it to the Her & Now programme (funded by Germany’s Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development to enable the professional development of budding women micro-entrepreneurs from backward areas of India).

**In search of synergy**

The Trusts have been exploring synergies with various entities, including research centres, startups and venture capital firms, to join well-structured programmes and thus create a win-win scenario. The myriad engagements of the partnerships team at the Trusts have resulted in project collaborations in agriculture and allied projects, water and sanitation, healthcare, and the like.

A key facet of the Trusts’ programmes is their alignment with national priorities. The Trusts have collaborated with government institutions and agencies in the implementation of many initiatives, among them the Swachh Bharat Mission, Poshan Abhiyaan, the Smart Cities Mission and the Aspirational Districts programme.

At a global level, the Trusts have been exploring collaborations that can supplement and further strengthen the scope and scale of their social uplift efforts. From this perspective, the recognition that standout programmes of the Trusts have won worldwide is a help.

Corporate entities are increasingly preferring effective and experienced implementing agencies to execute their CSR projects. The Covid-19 pandemic has added to this trend, with these entities seeking ever-better social return on their investments. That means the Trusts have to be well-prepared to take on greater responsibility to deliver sustainable and large-scale impact.

Coming together with like-minded organisations and institutions in India and abroad to realise the vision of positively impacting, at scale, the lives of underprivileged people and communities in the country – that has been the strategy and thinking of the Tata Trusts. Proof of the value to be derived from this approach lies in the positive and widespread impact of such collaborations.
Farms are rural, but rural is not just farms

Policymaking must reflect a nuanced understanding of the reality that there is much more to rural India than agriculture.

India has a constitutional administrative separation between rural and urban areas. This is enshrined as parts IX and IXA, inserted through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, which define the structure of local governments and their relationship to the state and union. Each settlement in India is governed either by an urban local body — from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation in Mumbai to the Jhanjharpur Nagar Panchayat in Madhubani in Bihar — or, if rural, by a panchayat (village council).

The classification has concrete consequences for the implementation of government schemes that differ between urban and rural areas. It decides whether the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act will apply to residents, the amount of subsidy due to beneficiaries under the Swachh Bharat (clean India) Mission, and a lot more. There are complications here.

Even the Census of India has, for a long time, recognised the incongruity of fitting India’s settlements into a neat binary categorisation. That explains the intermediate classification — the census town — a settlement that is administered by a panchayat but whose population size and physical and economic character are not rural. Specifically, it needs to have a population in excess of 5,000, a density of more than 400 people per sq km, and more than three-fourths of its male workforce engaged in non-farm work.

Over the 2001-2011 period, the share of the country’s urban population living in census towns doubled from 7.4% to 14.6%. This phenomenon has occupied the policymaker’s imagination.

India’s economy and its people transcend the segregation. Subject to dated data — the split between rural and urban is published infrequently and was last released by the government in 2017, for the year 2011-12 — India’s rural economy is not just a farm economy.

As figure 1 shows, agriculture (including fishing and forestry) formed only 38.7% of the rural economy in 2011-12, the rest comprising manufacturing, construction and services. Even back in 1999-2000, agriculture’s share was barely above 50%. Since then, construction and manufacturing grew at the expense of agriculture, as the reform process built up steam over the following decade.

Figure 2 reveals the extent of economic activity taking place in rural areas under different heads. In a number of key sectors — manufacturing, for instance, as well as real estate — the rural share has grown over time and over half of manufacturing GDP came from rural areas even in 2011-12.

Some of this relocation to the rural periphery of large cities has been to benefit from land availability, industrial estates outside urban boundaries, etc, but that is
not the only explanation. The rural roads programme has increased connectivity and, in some states, electricity supply is reasonably reliable. This enables small towns and nearby villages to become hubs of economic activity and occasionally, a global ‘micropolis’ (an example is Tiruchengode in Tamil Nadu).

**Holding its own**

Overall, despite various claims popularised by the media, the official estimate is that 47.7% of India’s GDP came from rural areas in 2011-12, almost the same as in 1999-2000. That means the country’s rural sector held its own during a period that saw among the highest growth rates experienced by the Indian economy.

Much like the economy, people too do not stay fixed to their administrative boundaries — they commute and migrate. Households often spread risk, with some members seeking non-farm work while others look after farming. The poor are less able to do this. Unskilled landless labourers choose between farm work or brick kilns and construction sites (both of which may be in nearby rural areas).

The government has admitted to over 10 million inter-state returnees post-Covid, but the overwhelming proportion of migrants do not leave their home states. Immediately after the lockdown in late March, the number of Facebook users — yes, many migrants at the lower end of the scale use the social networking site — dropped sharply in the big cities and even in small towns. And it rose in villages, digital affirmation of the images of people streaming home on empty highways.

The spread of the non-farm economy and transport improvements (almost a third of rural households now own a two-wheeler) also facilitate local commuting. A study by S Chandrasekhar and Ajay Sharma estimated an up to four-fold increase in commuting, both rural-urban and urban-rural, for non-farm work between 1993-94 and 2009-10.

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**Figure 1: Structure of India’s rural economy: 1999-2000 and 2011-12**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and mining</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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This, in itself, generates work in the intermediate public transport sector, with small vehicles ferrying people and goods to and fro. With increasing income from non-farm sources, supporting farming is important, but it is not the only way to increase rural incomes.

**Policy response**

How should public policy respond to this fluid reality? First, the design of central government schemes need to avoid the rural-urban differentiation. A good cross-learning example is the beneficiary-led construction in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) Mission, which intends to provide housing for all people living in urban areas by 2022. Borrowed from rural housing schemes, such construction is now the dominant model in urban India as well.

Second, states must realise that the demand for services cannot be grouped into a neat binary. Administratively rural areas may demand septic tank cleaning services and streetlights, as much as people in areas classified as urban may want to seek work at MGNREGA sites.

Third, the push to ‘make in India’ or to make Bharat *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) need not be a story just of big cities and large-scale migration. It can also be a story that is more dispersed, with diverse economic activities across a large number of small- and medium-sized cities, drawing upon local labour pools while serving a global market.

In India, large enterprises may be able to self-provide reliable power, logistics services and the rest in rural areas, but micro, small and medium enterprises may be unable to thrive outside an urban ecosystem that provides them common shared services. That’s why focusing on service provision in smaller towns is crucial for an *atmanirbhar* Bharat.

The key to these policy changes is opening one’s mind to a recognition of the rural as it is in today’s India.