TATA TRUSTS

FEBRUARY 2026

HORIZONS

CARE FROM THE HEART

Healthcare is the centrepiece of an exceptional endeavour to help tribal communities in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh

FEATHER TOUCH

Talented young shuttlers are taking flight in Mizoram as badminton gets support and a booster dose

EMPATHY, PLEASE

The societal needs of India's transgender community are the concern of a network of clinics

INTERVIEW

Arunabha Ghosh, scientist and public policy expert, advocates for 'personalising' the climate crisis

EDITORIAL

Healthcare professionals trying to make a difference in rural India are a blessed lot, angels of mercy labouring away in a landscape where the odds are often stacked against them. The doctors, nurses, health workers and other support staff of Jan Swasthya Sahyog (JSS), the protagonist of our cover story, do much more than merely a job — they are a reflection of the noble in human nature.

The Tata Trusts have been a steadfast supporter of JSS, and with good reason. The organisation's long-running programme to provide tribal communities, and many others on the margins, with quality healthcare are a singular example of overcoming challenges that range from resources to logistics to geography. While healthcare remains the priority for JSS, this exemplary nonprofit also serves disadvantaged rural communities in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in a host of other ways: with childcare centres, farming and livelihood opportunities, even in human-animal conflict.

Cut of a similar cloth is the YR Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education and its Sabrang network of clinics for transgender individuals, perhaps the most victimised of India's citizens. Our feature story on Sabrang's efforts to address the healthcare and societal needs of the country's transgender community is an eye-opener, as is — on a more positive note — the article explaining how young badminton talent in Mizoram is reaching new heights thanks to a grassroots-to-tournaments initiative.

The feature stories spread in this edition of *Horizons* also includes a conservation project in Ladakh that is repairing and preserving historical artefacts that illuminate the region's cultural legacy; and a programme to boost cotton farmers by promoting a shift to high-density planting systems.

Climate scientist and public policy maven Arunabha Ghosh, our interview personality this time, says it as he sees it when he says, "We Indians are schizophrenic", before hitting an affirmative pitch by adding that "we have to ask our children to open their minds and imagine that a new and different world is possible". Our 'Opinion' section has a band of experts suggesting solutions for the problems with multilingual education in India, and Sohini Mookherjee of J-PAL South Asia advocating for evidence-driven social development programmes.

Not least, our 'Showcase' segment 'pictures' the benefits accruing to village folks up in Uttarakhand's hills through a community-based tourism venture. If the offbeat is your cup of travel, make a visit.

Chistabelle Noronha

We hope you will help us make Horizons *better with your valuable feedback. Please do write to us at horizons@tatatrusts.org.*

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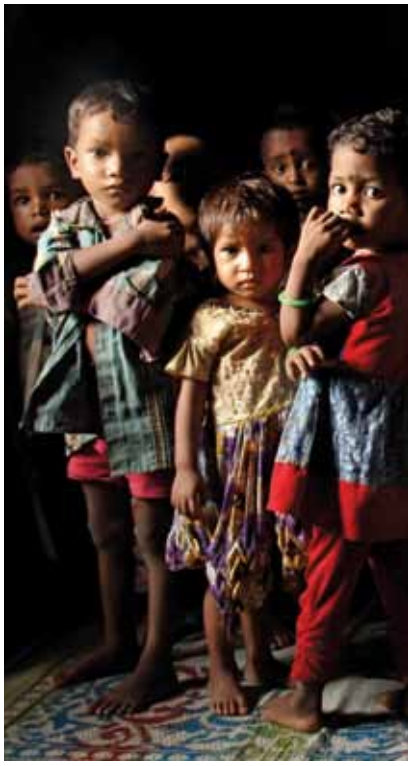


INTERVIEW

FEATURE STORIES

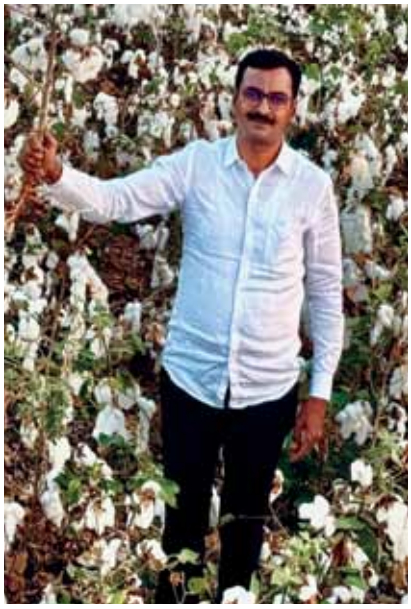
EDITOR
Christabelle Noronha
Email: cnoronha@tatatrusts.org

EDITORIAL TEAM
Philip Chacko
Labonita Ghosh
Gayatri Kamath
Shubha Madhukar

EDITORIAL COORDINATORS
Sonia Divyang
Nisha Swami

DESIGNED BY
The Information Company

FEATURE STORIES



SHOWCASE

OPINION

Cover image
Medical staff sharing a lighter moment with a patient in the intensive-care unit of the hospital set up by Jan Swasthya Sahyog in Ganiyari in Chhattisgarh's Bilaspur district

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Abraham K John
Shilpa Naresh

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CONTACT
Tata Trusts
World Trade Centre 1
26th Floor, Cuffe Parade
Mumbai 400 005
India

In rural country, care that counts

Healthcare is at the heart of Jan Swasthya Sahyog's exceptional efforts to help underserved tribal communities, and others as well, in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. By Labonita Ghosh

All my life I have seen medical emergencies in our village being treated by a local *vaid* (ayurvedic practitioner) or a witch doctor," says Jeevanti Toppo, a resident of Mahamai village in Chhattisgarh's Bilaspur district. "Whether it was a common cold or pregnancy-related complications, the solution was either some plant derivative or a 'dusting down'. We were told illness had befallen the family because the gods were unhappy, and we never questioned this."

It took Ms Toppo, a 38-year-old tribal, many years into adulthood to realise these age-old practises had

Tribal children at a creche set up by JSS in Surhi village in Chhattisgarh's Mungeli district

no scientific basis and were, in fact, the cause of many untimely deaths in her village. That realisation spurred her to become a health worker with Jan Swasthya Sahyog (JSS), a nonprofit that helps provide affordable and quality healthcare in 72 tribal villages in and around the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve near Bilaspur.

Long-standing support

JSS has been supported by the Tata Trusts since 2001 for various initiatives, including an all-service hospital at Ganiyari on the outskirts of Bilaspur. In 2024, the Trusts began collaborating with the organisation on a two-year programme to improve access to comprehensive primary healthcare in the tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, as well as two districts in Madhya Pradesh (Anuppur and Dindori).

"JSS has evolved as a resource centre for tribal health over the years," says Amar Nawkar, a programme officer with the Trusts. "It has emerged as an authoritative voice on tribal health thanks to the efforts of its doctors and community health workers, and how they have approached the idea of healthcare in rural regions."

Dedicated personnel are one of JSS's strengths and Ms Toppo is an example. She manages the health needs of nine of the 72 villages around Achanakmar: from advising and facilitating access to medicines, to referring emergency cases to the next level of care (primarily the Ganiyari hospital).

Ms Toppo goes from home to home, treating those who cannot

Paediatrician Dr Anju Kataria examines a child at the hospital established by JSS in Ganiyari village in the Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh

Casting a wide net

Jan Swasthya Sahyog has delivered quality healthcare and more to underserved villagers

- **40,000+** number of tribal beneficiaries reached from 72 villages in and around the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh.
- **160,000+** size of population around the intensive field practice area accessing services from JSS's health centres.
- **1.5 million+** rural and tribal poor from 2,700 villages in nine districts of Chhattisgarh and eastern Madhya Pradesh who access care at the 150-bed Ganiyari hospital and its health centres.
- **250,000+** villagers screened for the rampant sickle-cell disease in Madhya Pradesh.
- **1,800+** children taken care of in creches managed by the community in Chhattisgarh.

A JSS health worker crossing the Maniyari river to make a work-related visit to Katami village in Chhattisgarh's Mungeli district

travel to the nearest health centre; counsels family members to be better caregivers for older patients and those with disabilities; and follows up existing cases. She even attends to noncommunicable diseases like hypertension and diabetes. As part of a cohort of women health workers attached to JSS, Ms Toppo is trained to do this.

For tribal communities in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh — as in many other parts of India — the biggest problem is exclusion. They have to cope with geographic, economic, infrastructure and governance issues when it comes to accessing even the most basic healthcare benefits.

"For many far-flung tribal communities, dealing with a health problem means travelling long distances and taking different modes of transport just to reach the nearest primary health centre (PHC)," says Dr Raman Kataria, cofounder and executive committee member of JSS. "Travel may take 12 hours or more and cost as much as ₹2,000, leaving them with nothing for the treatment itself.

"Also, most government hospitals will not admit you directly unless it's an emergency. You have to go through the outpatient department, which may insist on more investigations and lab tests, so there's that cost too. As for private hospitals, they are out of bounds for poor tribal communities."

Saving a life

Topography adds to the difficulties. Last year, Manmati Baiga, a 35-year-old from Ghameri village near Achanakmar, was bitten by a snake. For two days her family did not realise what had happened as Ms Baiga slipped into a venom-induced paralysis.

"There is a lot of alcoholism in tribal communities and Manmati's family thought she was drunk on country liquor," says Praful Chandel, a village cluster coordinator with JSS. "Our health workers, on a chance visit, discovered the snakebite and carried her — on a charpoy across two raging rivers — to get treated."

Ms Baiga was administered an anti-venom dose at the local JSS-run health centre and then transferred to the intensive-care facility at the Ganiyari hospital. The care and attention she received saved Ms Baiga's life.

Given the situation they face, it's no surprise that tribal families either forego treatment or turn to local practitioners — often with disastrous outcomes. Then there is what Dr Kataria calls a "triple whammy" of conditions.

"Undernutrition is common among tribals located in remote areas, and the cause is usually poverty and hunger," he says. "We have seen people, especially women, with a body mass index (BMI) as low as 10. Anything less than 13

JSS health workers at their monthly training session in Bamhani in Mungeli district

Community connect that runs deep

Having worked for many years in healthcare, Jan Swasthya Sahyog (JSS) is now looking beyond this core in its project areas. As Praful Chandel, the nonprofit's cluster head for forest villages in Chhattisgarh, puts it: "There are other serious community-level issues in the region that demand attention, in farming, with livelihood opportunities, even human-animal conflicts."

In Manpur village in Bilaspur district, 80% of the population belongs to the Gond tribal community. Farming is this community's primary source of income, supplemented by forest-based activities and seasonal wage labour. Traditionally, the farmers here practised diversified agriculture, cultivating a second crop of pulses and oilseeds sown into standing paddy. This ensured protein-rich foods for the household.

Gradually, these practices changed because of crop destruction by stray cattle and wild animals. The burden of night-long vigils in their fields forced farmers to abandon their second crop, and this made household diets heavily rice-dependent (a primary cause of undernutrition in the region).

With JSS's help, Manpur's villagers got started on a community-fencing project by mapping farming land, estimating material requirements and committing to household-level contributions of labour and resources. This resulted in 160 acres of farmland being fenced and — without the additional pressure of constant guarding — 60 acres being used to cultivate pulses and oilseeds as in the past.

Benefits have accrued quickly as a consequence: seasonal migration has declined and household food baskets have started to become more diversified with the introduction of protein and fats. ■

makes standard medical treatment, even survival, difficult."

Undernutrition leaves these villagers more vulnerable to common ailments such as diarrhoea and tuberculosis, or seasonal outbreaks of malaria, dengue and water-borne diseases, which can be fatal. "They have persistent infections that can be overcome by vaccines or other protective measures," says Dr Kataria. If they could access these, that is.

To add to their health woes, Chhattisgarh's tribal communities are beset by 'lean' diabetes, which is different from the more common type 2 lifestyle-related variety. "They have low BMI and develop diabetes at a much younger age, in their 20s and 30s," adds Dr Kataria.

Food scarcity leads to poor diets. "Whatever crops or vegetables they grow are sold in the market," says Dr Kataria. "Their staple is the rice provided by the government's public distribution system. This polished rice has a poor glycaemic index and is very unhealthy."

JSS has now embarked on a mission to plug gaps in primary healthcare delivery for tribal villages, improve the quality and range of healthcare services, and design critical-care pathways for tribal communities struck by conditions such as sickle-cell disease and cancer.

JSS has undertaken research and documentation in the 72 villages around Achanakmar, mainly by setting up three subcentres in village clusters and recording data from the Ganiyari hospital. Together, the subcentres and the hospital cater to a population of about 1.5 million people, 40,000 from the programme villages and 160,000 from 2,700-odd villages in and around Bilaspur.

A child from Karhikachchar village in Bilaspur being checked by JSS health workers for a nutrition assessment

Stressing training

With such a large base to care for, JSS's people have to be well-trained. "One aspect of our work relates to providing clinical care through village health workers, who are all women selected by the community," explains Dr Kataria. "Some of them are semi-literate, so they receive both literacy and healthcare training."

Another JSS project concerns *phulwaris* (creches), set up to prevent malnutrition among young children. "Children up to six months of age are nutritionally sound because they're exclusively breastfed," says Dr Kataria. "Once they are older and the mother leaves them at home while she goes to work, their nutrition starts suffering. We decided to start creches where working women could leave their children, whose diet and safety would also be taken care of."

The village chooses an older woman to manage about 10 children in a creche. They are fed three-four times a day and receive almost 100% of their protein and 70% of their calorific requirement during these eight hours in care. They are also engaged in play and learning activities. Currently, some 1,800 children are being taken care of in these *phulwaris*.

JSS's most substantial contribution is the Ganiyari hospital in Chhattisgarh. With the Trusts' support, the hospital has grown over the past two decades from a four-bed unit to a 150-bed institution. It provides many essential services — medical, surgical, paediatric and obstetric — and has formed links with diagnostic and public-health facilities for seamless referrals and patient management.

"Almost all common specialities are dealt with here," says Dr Kataria. "We may not have cardiologists or rheumatologists, but we have internal medicine experts who take care of most problems, and we also consult remotely with specialists."

In Madhya Pradesh, while working with the state government

JSS health workers recording the vitals of a patient at the Shivtarai subcentre in Bilaspur

to promote better maternal and newborn care in the districts of Anuppur and Dindori, JSS encountered a different kind of problem: a flurry of sickle-cell disease (SCD) cases. This congenital blood disorder affects the vital organs and requires early screening and lifelong treatment.

Unfortunately, JSS found there were no means of diagnosing SCD within the public health system, either in the district hospitals or at community health centres. The nearest facilities for this were the Jabalpur or Raipur medical colleges, both well over 200km away.

In 2017, JSS set up innovatively developed, low-cost haemoglobin electrophoresis machines in district hospitals and referral units to diagnose SCD, with a test costing as little as ₹25 (compared with ₹600-700 elsewhere).

The tests unearthed, for the first time, a considerable burden of the disease. "In Madhya Pradesh we have screened more than 250,000 people, diagnosed some 3,500, and identified the sickle cell trait in another 28,000," says Dr Kataria. "We have even created a sickle-cell registry."

JSS now works with the district administrations of Anuppur and Dindori to identify and treat SCD. In Chhattisgarh, it has instituted cost-effective diagnostic tests and set up a collaborative centre for excellence at the Ganiyari hospital for SCD patients. In Madhya Pradesh, JSS's advocacy has led the state government to launch its own SCD and anaemia-elimination programme since 2018.

"While JSS's initiatives are designed from an equity angle for vulnerable tribal populations, they benefit the entire catchment area the organisation works in," says Mr Nawkar of the Trusts. "People from non-tribal villages, even from Bilaspur, come to the Ganiyari hospital because of widespread trust that the organisation has earned."

"Ultimately, it is the government that is the major provider of healthcare for marginalised people," says Dr Kataria. "What we really want to do is improve the quality of services within the government system." ■

Climate action in a time of schizophrenia

Climate scientist and public policy expert **Arunabha Ghosh** believes that India's ambivalence about the steps needed to combat climate change is holding the country back.

The founder and chief executive of the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), which ranks among Asia's leading thinktanks, says policymaking is critical to nudge India towards a desirable direction, but a climate-resilient future starts with a change in our behaviour.

In this interview with Labonita Ghosh, Mr Ghosh explains why the messaging about climate change must be personalised — how it affects our lives, our livelihoods and our neighbourhoods — to grasp the full import of our rapidly deteriorating situation.

"We must approach climate change in a data-oriented way, where the data is hyperlocal and, therefore, salient for administrators and citizens."

Let's talk about what is uppermost on everyone's mind in India today: air pollution. How can we tackle it?

The first thing to do is recognise that it will take a few years to get sorted, and only with a mission-oriented approach. We have to understand that air pollution is a challenge not just for Delhi, and not just in the winter months. We have a year-round, country-wide problem of air pollution. This is the biggest public health challenge we face today.

It is also an economic challenge, with close to 3% of our GDP getting impacted, and a human development challenge, because air pollution impacts educational outcomes, brain development, the condition of foetuses and unborn children. We have to think of clean air as an economic asset.

How do we do that? It's like a patient at a multi-speciality hospital where different teams of specialists target different aspects of a problem. Transport is the biggest source but you also have industry, construction, biomass burning and indoor air pollution. Each of these aspects needs to be addressed.

Have we even made a start with trying to tackle it? The problem appears to be worsening every year.

Targeted work can have an impact. The government and regulators have to

keep at it and citizens must also contribute. We Indians are schizophrenic. We are economic agents by day and citizens by night. Citizens want clean air but economic agents — the same human beings — do not want to drive a cleaner vehicle or pay a higher cost for waste disposal. As long as this schizophrenia persists, no amount of public programming can work, and that's why we must treat it collectively.

Do we need a similar mission-oriented approach to mitigate the climate crisis in India?

We already have a mission-oriented approach there. The National Action Plan on Climate Change was launched in 2008, and under that, various missions were launched as well. The most successful has been the solar mission, which started in 2010. At that time India generated less than 20 megawatts of solar energy; today it produces more than 100,000 megawatts.

We have become the world's fourth-largest clean energy power in terms of deployed capacity. Another reasonably successful effort is the National Mission for Energy Efficiency. All this is good, but the climate crisis is worsening. When we talk about climate risks, we say that the probability of something bad, or really bad, happening goes up over time.

We must approach climate change in a data-oriented way, where the data is hyperlocal and, therefore, salient for administrators and citizens. If I told you India is in a bad shape, what would you do with that information? Individual citizens focus on what it means for their lives, for their livelihoods, for their neighbourhoods.

About 80% of our population lives in areas that are highly vulnerable to extreme hydrometeorological disasters and 55% of our subdistricts have seen a decrease in [rainfall from] the southwest monsoon over the last decade. The point is, climate change is now about climate variability.

Heat stress is going to affect our economic growth while we are still building our country. Bridges, buildings and railroads are under construction and there's a lot of employment out there. But if the 'hot days' in India's districts increase by an additional four to twenty each summer, that would translate into tens of millions of man-days lost because it's too hot to work in the open. And not least, we are at our most vulnerable when it comes to water, whether it's with rainfall or declining water tables.

There appears to be an absence of public consciousness in India about climate change. How do we change that?

I don't want to suggest that there's an easy answer, but the first thing we must do is make our analyses more salient. If a bunch of nerds are doing some modelling and saying we're going to get impacted, ordinary citizens may not care. But you can make it salient by saying, for instance, that if you are a construction company, your construction activities will slow down by 20% because of heat stress. Whether it is from a human-centric or a capital investment perspective, or even from a livestock perspective, you have to make the information salient to those who may care about it.

Second, we have to embed this in broader economic ministries, not just the environment ministry, because we all care about economic growth and poverty reduction. Only then will you get a pro-economic perspective of how this will impact things. A third approach is a more positive one. Many startups are going to be looking at advanced technology — consumer tech, AI, fintech, etc — and sometimes these are all linked. AI and its modelling capabilities can help us create better predictive analytics with regard to climate.

Once we internalise this, we will be able to grasp our bottom-up sense of vulnerability and our top-down sense of macroeconomic challenges, as well as our opportunities in terms of using technology as a new driver of growth, as a new vector of innovation and startup energy. Then we may begin to change the way we approach the idea of climate resilience.

How can public policymaking contribute to climate action?

The role of public policy is absolutely central; it must be the initial spark that lights the fire. Let me give a philosophical or normative reason for this. The primary responsibility of the state is to protect its people. The

"...public policy needs to go beyond the energy sector and start embedding the standards of action needed from other economic sectors. Public policy has to set benchmarks."

Arunabha Ghosh with Yuri Afanasiev, the then United Nations resident representative in India, at a solar-powered farm in Andhra Pradesh in June 2018 (photo credit: the Council on Energy, Environment and Water)

right to life is at the heart of what the state has to deliver; everything else follows from there.

Climate change impacts our lives. At a normative level, internalising that climate change is not just the next heavy rainfall or the two hot days you have to endure, but a chronic crisis that impacts your life and livelihood. That makes public policy a driver of climate action. Now, at an instrumental level, how do you do it? First, we must recognise what is driving climate change. The energy system we currently have is the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions. We must use public policy to fix that energy system, globally and nationally.

The public policies that we have had in terms of launching a solar mission or setting targets for clean energy are ways in which new technologies and innovations are enabled to flourish. It's equally important that public policy be consistent and long-term, because fluctuations and oscillations create investment uncertainties.

The second point is that public policy needs to go beyond the energy sector and start embedding the standards of action needed from other economic sectors. Public policy has to set benchmarks. For example, SEBI has instituted regulations that require the largest 1,000 companies to report on how they are becoming more climate-oriented. This is not just about the energy sector or clean transport; it signals that all economic sectors matter.

A lot of the problems that we face today with climate change, not just in India but across the world, stem from our preoccupation with

production emissions. For example, the emissions from a factory that makes certain things. But why is that factory making those things? Because we, as citizens, demand it. Why are we not asking our individual behaviours to shift so that the factory can make electric rather than diesel vehicles, so that the cotton your T-shirt is made from is sustainably sourced? This will not come from a bleeding-heart approach. It sometimes takes public policy interventions to nudge behaviour.

What is India's approach to energy transition? And our objectives?
India, as well as other developing countries, is going through not one, but four energy transitions. Number one is getting energy in the first place. When the [United Nations'] Sustainable Development Goals were announced in 2015, India had the largest number of people anywhere in the world without access to electricity. In response, the government created two schemes by which, in just 18 months, 30 million homes got access to electricity for the first time.

Second, we are going to see a lot of migration from rural to urban areas, which means that energy demands and energy patterns will shift from rural to urban. This requires more energy efficiency in our buildings, factories, transport systems, even in our home appliances. The third factor is making sure our energy becomes cleaner and cleaner.

The fourth transition is our deeper integration into global energy markets. That means not just securing oil and gas like in the past, but securing what we call the fuels of the future: minerals, solar panels, batteries, wind turbines and the like. There is a fifth transition as well: pairing energy transition with the digital revolution. Digital distribution helps us decentralise energy systems and make our homes, appliances and cars talk to one another.

Can we imagine a future without fossil fuels? What are your hopes and misgivings about this?
I believe we don't have an option [but to move away from fossil fuels]. I'm not suggesting that energy systems will change that soon. Today, an electricity transformer is exactly what it looked like in the late 19th century. Energy systems are like sloths; they take very long to shift course. Our hopes and misgivings have to be recalibrated accordingly.

The fear is of two kinds. First, the interests of those currently in power may try to slow things down. The transition must happen in an orderly manner or there will be a backlash. You have got to manage this transition not just technologically or financially, but also politically.

My second fear relates to a lack of imagination. We are all sort of in the matrix, but we've got to imagine a future where we live differently, eat differently, move and interact differently. We have been brainwashed; we have to ask our children to open their minds and imagine that a new and different world is possible. ■

"We have been brainwashed; we have to ask our children to open their minds and imagine that a new and different world is possible."

Shuttling success gathers steam

The Mizoram Badminton Initiative nurtures young talent from the grassroots level to the tournament stage

Back in 2010, four-year-old Lalthazuala Hmar took after his father when he picked up a badminton racket for the first time. By the age of seven, Zuala, as he is fondly called, was playing tournament badminton. But much as the young talent wanted to pursue the game seriously, the road ahead was tough for his Aizawl-based family. That was not going to stymie Zuala, though. With his father's training and a government-employee mother who held the household together, the budding shuttler made light of the deterrents.

Now 18, Zuala has risen to become the maiden international badminton player from Mizoram and is currently ranked seventh in India in the under-19 category. Having represented India at the Badminton Asia Junior Championships in July 2025, he contributed to team India's maiden medal win — a bronze — at the BWF World Junior Championships held in Guwahati in October 2025, and has played tournaments in China, the Netherlands and Germany.

The turning point in Zuala's journey occurred when he joined the Regional Development Centre (RDC) in Aizawl under the Mizoram Badminton Initiative, a Tata Trusts programme launched in 2018 in collaboration with the Mizoram State Sports Council, the Mizoram Badminton Association and the Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy (PGBA).

A young player is taken through her paces at the Zuangtui Stadium in Aizawl

Zuala and his younger sister, Rinhlui, were among the first to be selected for specialised training at the centre. Under the tutelage of expert coaches, Zuala's talent has blossomed. "We are grateful to the Trusts, the Academy and the coaches for honing our son's potential," says Zuala's father, Zohmangaiha Hmar.

The Aizawl RDC, which opened in 2019, targets talented youngsters drawn from grassroots programmes. That was the

path taken by Zuala, who came through club, district and state levels to make a mark on the national stage. In 2023, he made history by becoming the first player from Mizoram to win a junior national badminton championship when he clinched the under-17 crown in the Hyderabad edition.

The win opened doors to national recognition for Zuala, as also the profile of the game in Mizoram. "Earlier, we couldn't win medals even at the Northeast level; now we are in the national reckoning championships and have reached the international stage," says Lalnghinglova Hmar, Mizoram's sports minister. "Our youngsters are the torchbearers of the state's badminton movement."

The idea of the Mizoram Badminton Initiative was born when Kannan Gopinathan, a senior bureaucrat stationed in Mizoram, pushed to capitalise on two factors prevalent across the state: a deep-rooted sporting culture and plenty of indoor badminton courts. He took the lead in bringing Pullela Gopichand and Tata Trusts together. What followed was a community-led grassroots programme designed to turn potential into performance.

Badminton ace Pullela Gopichand awarding the best grassroots prize to a trainer in the project

Mizoram already had the essentials in place. Almost every locality has an indoor badminton hall and a community that uses it. A large number of recreational and competitive players, a plethora of clubs and fierce local rivalries have enabled badminton to flourish. Add to that athletes with ability and a hunger to compete. The missing ingredients were structured training and competitive exposure for younger players. The Mizoram Badminton Initiative provides that and more.

Grassroots start

The Initiative has a tiered system: 40 grassroots training centres across Mizoram and two regional competitive training centres. Each centre is managed by a committee comprising community members, a local coach and a district representative from the Initiative. Fees were set by the committee according to local capacity and reinvested for the upkeep of individual centres.

The badminton programme, which integrates sports and academics to create well-rounded athletes, is implemented through the Trusts' associate organisation, the North East Initiative Development Agency. The aim is to identify talent at the grassroots level and, then, to deliver quality coaching and world-class facilities.

"The initial seed funding covered coach salaries, quality equipment, travel costs for inter-state tournaments and multi-week residential camps at PGBA Hyderabad," says Neelam Babardesai, who heads the sports portfolio at the Trusts. "By the time phase two of the programme was launched in 2021, many centres were self-sustaining and paying trainer salaries from local fees, making the model rare and replicable."

A standard operating practices manual has clarified roles, processes and documentation, with committee and association members receiving training in

management and governance. Beyond coaching, the programme has layered in life skills and sports psychology while paving talent pathways. The Initiative's key interventions include:

- *Scholarship placements:* Of 50+ players trained at the regional centres, 18 have earned full scholarships to residential academies, notably PGBA Hyderabad and the Badminton Centre of Excellence at ITM University, Raipur.
- *Pullela Gopichand intensive training programme:* Intensive training camps funded by PGBA for top regional players provide promising youngsters with regular exposure to elite coaching.
- *Mental skills:* Group sessions led by sports psychologists help players manage match pressure and sharpen focus, while also breaking the stigma around seeking psychological support and making such support accessible and affordable.
- *Grassroots leagues and awards:* A state-wide league has given more than 300 players sustained competitive exposure. Awards for the best centre and the best trainers have made excellence aspirational and visible.

Badminton was always more than just a hobby or a passion in Mizoram. It has now become a movement thanks to the Mizoram Badminton Initiative and similar endeavours. These grassroots-to-structured training efforts are guided by mentors from the PGBA, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem of opportunity and excellence.

The results of the Initiative, in particular, are both numerical and transformational. Of the 40 grassroots centres established initially, 28 remain active. Trainers and communities have adopted a sporting rhythm and training routines, and children have developed healthier habits, discipline and stronger social bonds.

Smashing talent

From picking up the racket at the age of five, when she could not even reach the net, 16-year-old Zoramthari Renthlei is today emerging as one of Mizoram's — and India's — most promising young badminton talents.

Her father Lalthlekchuailova Renthlei, a devoted badminton enthusiast, was her first mentor and would confidently tell friends that his daughter would one day make a name for herself on the global stage. Fate, however, dealt a cruel blow in 2017 when her father passed away. Zoramthari was only seven then but, inspired by his belief and driven by determination, she has carried his dream forward.

Zoramthari's competitive journey began in 2018 at the Champai grassroots centre. She quickly made her mark, claiming championship titles in the U-9, U-11 and U-13 categories. Her growing reputation earned her selection for advanced training stints at Aizawl, the ITM Raipur Badminton Academy and eventually at the Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy in Hyderabad.

In October 2025, Zoramthari won a bronze (see above) in the mixed doubles category in the All-India Junior Ranking Tournament held in Madurai. She currently continues her training at PGBA, sharpening her skills and preparing for higher levels of competition. ■

And in Maharashtra…

The lessons from the Mizoram Badminton Initiative have been replicated in the 'Grassroots Kreedakul' programme in rural Maharashtra, where the Tata Trusts have fostered the holistic development of talented young badminton players through structured training, life-skills education and health interventions.

This initiative, designed to benefit children in the 8-14 age bracket, incorporates physical fitness as also mental and emotional well-being. Launched in 2024, Grassroots Kreedakul is the Trusts' first hub-and-spoke sports development model, designed to nurture rural talent and build local ecosystems that can sustain sporting excellence.

Implemented by Jnana Prabodhini Kreedakul (JPK), a pioneering sports school with 25 years of experience, the programme integrates sports, academics, mental conditioning, and Ayurvedic health practices to create well-rounded athletes.

Over the years, JPK's holistic approach has enabled more than 200 athletes to win national medals, with seven representing India at international tournaments. Grassroots Kreedakul builds on this proven model to reach deeper into rural areas, empowering local organisations to manage 10–12 grassroots centres across village clusters.

Access to quality sports infrastructure and training remains limited in rural India, where young talent often lacks exposure, resources and structured coaching. The Grassroots Kreedakul initiative addresses this gap by combining scientific training methods, community participation and traditional knowledge systems to develop physically and mentally resilient youth.

The programme operates through four hubs in Baramati, Harali, Maval and Chiplun, covering about 35 villages and reaching some 1,200 rural children with structured, play-based sports training. Besides the sporting aspect, the initiative has improved nutrition, hygiene and overall well-being of the participating children while creating local employment opportunities.

There are centre management committees at each Grassroots Kreedakul centre, comprising trainers, parents, and community members. These committees foster local ownership and ensure effective management, paving the way for the long-term sustainability of the centres. ■

In the matter of performance on the bigger stage, four players from Mizoram have become national champions and the state's boys team has climbed from bronze to gold-medal status at the badminton nationals in just one year, with five of the seven members of the team being part of the Initiative.

Two of the programme alumni, Zuala and C Lalramsanga, represented India at the Junior World Badminton Championship in October 2025, contributing to India's first-ever team medal at that level (a bronze). "The two Mizoram kids played a stellar part in winning the team bronze, and in Mizoram winning the team gold in the national championships," says badminton legend and coach Pullela Gopichand. "This is one of my biggest success stories of recent times."

Three-pronged advantage

This success has come from three aligned forces: an ingrained sporting culture, fit-for-purpose community infrastructure, and outside technical and financial support that respects and amplifies local ownership.

The Tata Trusts and their partners didn't replace the community; they cemented it by supplying structure, expertise and pathways to sporting excellence. For the Trusts, it's about creating long-term impact across the sporting landscape of Northeast India.

Mizoram's badminton story is a reminder that sports can be nurtured outside of elite facilities and groups of elite athletes. A combination of community involvement, natural athletic advantages, locally owned systems and funding support has filled gaps in the sporting ecosystem of the state. Top-notch outcomes have followed. ■

By Kishore Rathod

Early is the key

A joint policy document crafted by the Tata Trusts and Unicef aims to strengthen India's child education ecosystem

Children at a primary school in Mandalagiri in Karnataka's Koppal district, where an early childhood education initiative is being run by Kalike, an associate entity of the Tata Trusts

Small interventions paired with knowledge can create a lasting impact. For Renu Sharma, an *anganwadi* (child and mother care centre) worker in Peechupara Kalan village in Rajasthan's Dausa district, it was a matter of deep concern that despite her dedication in providing nutritious meals to her community members, they were reluctant to consume the fortified take-home ration (THR).

The *anganwadi* provides several services at the village level for children under the age of six and for pregnant and lactating mothers. During a field visit by local officials, it came to light that Ms Sharma herself was unaware of the benefits of the fortified food.

Recognising the knowledge gap, Ms Sharma was provided counselling through a Tata Trusts-supported intervention that covered the basic science behind fortification, the importance of essential nutrients, and how fortified staples can combat malnutrition. The information was shared in an accessible way so that young mothers could understand its importance. The team from the Trusts also encouraged

Sustainable, scalable

The Tata Trusts framework for early childhood education (ECE) has been successfully implemented across states through partner organisations.

Kalike, an associate organisation of the Trusts that works in Karnataka, has scaled up its ECE model through technical support to 13,300 *anganwadis* (child and mother care centres), reaching nearly 380,000 children in seven districts through collaborations with the state's Department of Women and Child Development and the Kalyan Karnataka Board.

Independent evaluations have revealed significant improvements through these efforts in the learning environment, supervision, worker capacity and ECE practices, resulting in the improved school readiness of children before they enter the formal education system.

In Rajasthan, the Centre for Microfinance, another associate organisation of the Trusts, has demonstrated quality ECE delivery in two districts, Sirohi and Karauli. The Centre has developed *anganwadi* (child and mother care centre) workers as trainers to address supervisory shortages. This has benefitted about 66,000 children in 1,400 *anganwadis.*

Where children are the beneficiaries

In Maharashtra, QUEST, an education resource organisation and long-term partner of the Trusts, has developed a multi-year ECE programme aligned with the National Education Policy 2020. Through a training model engaging the entire Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) hierarchy, it has transformed some 3,000 *anganwadis,* reaching more than 100,000 children.

Seeding an early-learning network in the country, the Trusts have brought together 25 organisations and experts. The purpose is to share resources and learning, undertake research and evidence creation, and join hands for policy advocacy on early learning. Considering scale and diversity, this approach of bringing key players together can go a long way in building consensus and collaboration.

Together, these interventions demonstrate that systemic capacity-building, hands-on training and strong demonstration models can significantly strengthen ECE delivery within ICDS. ■

Ms Sharma to participate in a *poshan maah* (nutrition month) recipe competition using THR products, where she went on to win first place. The real victory came later.

Knowing better enabled Ms Sharma to educate the households in her village, demonstrating how simple dietary changes could prevent malnutrition. "Learning about fortified food was a revelation," she says. "Earlier, I didn't understand its importance, but now I actively educate my village. Together, we can fight malnutrition, one meal at a time."

Fortified forever

Fortified foods are no longer seen by the villagers of Peechupara Kalan as just government rations, but as a key contributor to better health. Ms Sharma's efforts have led to increased THR consumption among women and children, and a shift in the community's attitude towards fortified staples.

The intervention in Ms Sharma's village is one of millions across the country under India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Initiated more than 50 years ago, ICDS is counted among the world's largest programmes aimed at childhood development and care. Over the past decade, the Tata Trusts have partnered with several civil society organisations in multiple states to strengthen early childhood development (ECD) through ICDS-run *anganwadis*, the focus being on children aged three to six.

Neuroscience research has produced compelling evidence highlighting the criticality of development in the early years, particularly from birth to age six. This understanding is reflected in India's Early Childhood Education (ECE) Policy, 2013, which notes that "there are critical stages in brain development during this period that influence physical and mental health... Deficits at this stage have substantive

adverse impacts on human development."

Research underscores the heightened biological sensitivity to environmental influences up to the age of eight and the lasting impact of early experiences on a child's future. During these years, neural connections form at an unprecedented rate — over one million per second — making this period uniquely influential.

Adequate nutrition supports physical growth, immune strength, early stimulation and quality education, which foster cognitive growth and social-emotional development. Together, these experiences lay the foundation for lifelong learning, problem-solving abilities and healthy social relationships.

The Trusts have cemented a long-standing commitment to reaching India's poorest communities through evidence-based, scalable models. Its education portfolio has primarily focused on strengthening government systems, recognising public education as the primary pathway for disadvantaged children. The ICDS scheme, which includes ECE for children aged three to six, is implemented through a vast network of 1.4 million *anganwadis,* the largest such network in the world.

Three key challenges

Anganwadi workers are mandated to deliver six services under ICDS, ECE among them. But this component remains neglected due to three key challenges: limited capacity and conceptual clarity on ECE; inadequate training and on-site mentoring for *anganwadi* workers; and insufficient availability and usage of age-appropriate teaching–learning materials.

"The Trusts support organisations that demonstrate scalable, high-quality ECE models within ICDS," says Amrita Patwardhan, who heads the education theme at the Trusts. These models converge around core intervention areas: the setting up of model *anganwadis* that demonstrate age-appropriate, play-based ECE, the use of these sites to deliver hands-on training, and the professional development of *anganwadi* workers.

A child explores a weighing machine at a primary school in Hosalingapura in Koppal; this is another school that is part of the Kalike programme

The interventions also include improving the *anganwadi* learning environment and community engagement, and strengthening systems to build long-term capacities within the ICDS ecosystem.

Unicef, the global body that works to promote and protect the rights of children in over 190 countries, works closely with the central government and multiple states, as do the Trusts. Both provide technical support to state governments, and the Trusts fund a large number of on-ground programmes on ECD.

Aligned with the common objective to strengthen ECD through *anganwadis* and with a view to advocating a future-focused framework, Unicef and the Trusts have released a joint policy brief on ECD, highlighting key issues and recommendations to strengthen services for young children.

"ECD is the bedrock of progress in the education system," says Saadhna Panday, chief of education at Unicef India. "When two credible partners — the Tata Trusts and Unicef — come together to speak with one voice on what works in ECD, the chance of shaping policy and practice increases significantly. Unicef is proud of this joint initiative and its growing partnership with the Trusts."

The joint policy brief has been shared with state- and district-level government departments of the women and child development and education ministries, the primary audience for it, as well as with the civil society partners of the Trusts, who are the key implementers working to strengthen *anganwadis*.

Fixing the framework

All government schemes and programmes flow from policy and regulatory frameworks. The union government's National Early Childhood Care and Education 2013 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have brought ECE within the ambit of the education policy. While NEP has opened up significant opportunities in the field of ECE, it has also foregrounded several new issues that need to be addressed.

"Even as ICDS has mandated *anganwadis* to deliver six services aimed at the holistic development of children up to age six, there are several implementation challenges that have resulted in uneven quality of services on the ground and lack of structured mechanisms to build the professional capacity of *anganwadi* workers," says Ms Patwardhan.

The need of the hour is to define a regulatory framework that sets standards for ECD. The joint policy brief underlines the need for strong structures and processes for professional development and training of ICDS functionaries. On-ground service can only improve when the workforce is trained and supported, the parent community is engaged, and sufficient allocations are made for this critical service.

The Tata Trusts-Unicef policy brief highlights gaps in the professional development of *anganwadi* workers and helpers, who are at the frontline of engaging with children and parents for ECD. It outlines the need for structured, hands-on training, makes a data-based case to fill vacancies in the workforce, especially at the supervisory levels and highlights the importance of integrated data collection and data analysis to inform planning.

In pursuit of the objectives outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and NEP 2020, there is also a need to establish resource organisations at the government level. These organisations can collaborate closely with governments, institutions and other stakeholders by offering technical assistance and policy suggestions to ensure high-quality early childhood care and education for the most disadvantaged children.

The Trusts are actively engaging with partners to design and implement programmes to develop robust models that can be demonstrated to state governments and scaled within their respective systems. These efforts focus on documenting best practices in early learning, drawn from programmes implemented by expert NGOs as well as within government systems.

"The intention is to create clear, practical guidance for all stakeholders seeking to provide meaningful and high-quality learning experiences for young children," adds Ms Patwardhan. "Through these initiatives, the Trusts are seeking to realise the vision of building a more equitable India by strengthening the public education system." ■

By Kishore Rathod

Some dignity and empathy, please

The healthcare and societal needs of transgender people — among the most marginalised of India's citizens — are the concern of Sabrang's clinics

Of all the sexual minorities in India, the transgender community is one of the most persecuted. Despite a landmark Supreme Court judgement in 2014 — which asserted that the community must be legally recognised as the third gender and accorded all the rights and privileges given to any citizen of the country — transgender people remain deeply marginalised.

Shunned by society and often abandoned by their biological families, harassed and discriminated against when it comes to employment, healthcare, housing and a general acceptance of their identity, transgender people continue to struggle to find their place in the Indian scheme of affairs.

"My brothers and sisters are forced to either beg on the streets or engage in sex work," says Babli, an activist and 'champion' from the transgender community in Mumbai. "All of us only want one thing — a safe space where we can

The Sabrang team with transgender individuals during an outreach initiative in Pune in late 2025

Transgender community members at a meeting in Hyderabad

Out in the cold

- Official estimates put the number of transgender people at 488,000, but independent researchers say the figure could be between 2 and 5 million.
- Over 50% of the country's transgender community resides in four states: Uttar Pradesh (28%), Andhra Pradesh (9%), Maharashtra (8%) and Bihar (8%).
- An estimated 27% of transgender individuals report being denied healthcare due to their gender identity; 50% attempt suicide before the age of 20.
- Economic exclusion is a reality that an estimated 92% of transgender people face, which may explain why a large — and unknown — number of them resort to sex work.
- The literacy rate of the transgender population is estimated to be 56% (the all-India average is about 75%); about 50% of this population has never attended school.
- An estimated 34% of transgender people are classified as workers; 41% of those employed are in informal labour.
- The central government's National Portal for Transgender Persons has enabled the identification of transgender people; by December 2023, 31,248 identity cards and 31,270 certificates had been issued to them.
- Ayushman Bharat TG Plus, a central government scheme, provides transgender individuals with a ₹500,000 annual coverage for gender-affirming care, hormone therapy and sex-reassignment surgery.

Sources: *Census 2011; Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment; International Journal of Recent Publication and Research; National Human Rights Commission; Drishti IAS; National Portal for Transgender Persons*

be ourselves, where we can live and work with dignity."

That is what Sabrang has been delivering for India's transgender community. With clinics across the country offering services exclusively to transgender people, Sabrang is run by the nonprofit YR Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education (YRGCARE). Three of these clinics, in Hyderabad, Pune and the Mumbai suburb of Thane, have been supported by the Tata Trusts since April 2025.

Previously known as Mitr clinics, which operated with overseas funding, these centres were renamed Sabrang. In Hindi that means 'all colours', underscoring the fact that the clinics welcome all people from the transgender community.

Down with discrimination

"With the support of the Tata Trusts, we are working on eliminating discrimination against the transgender community," says CK Vasudevan, YRGCARE's state manager for Maharashtra and the Thane clinic in charge. "If they are no longer stigmatised, this community that currently lives in the shadows will come out more willingly to avail healthcare and other benefits. But if they don't come forward, we will never know what kind of health problems they face; in many cases, these can be fatal."

YRGCARE has found, both during research and in the implementation of projects, that the health challenges among transgender individuals relate largely to gender-affirmation surgeries — expensive sex-reassignment procedures that require a lot of pre- and post-treatment care — substance abuse and mental ill-health. These make them vulnerable to various kinds of risks that may lead to contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

For instance, multiple research studies show disproportionately high HIV prevalence among transgender individuals

Transgender people at an interaction in Pune in October 2025

in India. Furthermore, data from the National AIDS Control Organisation indicates that many transgender people discontinue treatment because of ostracism.

"Besides a high incidence of STDs, the transgender community also carries a heavy burden of mental illnesses and noncommunicable diseases," says Zeenat Afshan, a programme associate with the Tata Trusts. "The community may not find the usual healthcare providers very helpful owing to stigma and their lack of social capital. Also, mainstream health systems are not sensitised about the gender-associated health issues of transgender individuals."

Sabrang's clinics and centres offer high-quality, transgender-specific health and social services. Additionally, they foster community resilience through outreach programmes and work to influence policy. The clinics function as safe, nonjudgmental spaces where transgender people feel a deep sense of belonging, where individuals can simply be themselves.

Sabrang provides free counselling sessions and affordable laser hair removal. Beyond healthcare, Sabrang educates transgender people about existing benefits such as the government's Ayushman Bharat Transgender Plus scheme, which delivers health insurance coverage of up to ₹500,000 for gender-affirming surgeries and related expenses. But many members of the community have no idea about this.

To access the scheme, one must hold a transgender card. Sabrang facilitates the acquisition of this, as well as gender-identity certificates (GICs) for those seeking sex-reassignment surgery. GICs allow people, no matter what stage of transition they are in, to access gender-neutral facilities like toilets and to be upfront about their birth gender with future employers and with law enforcement and other officials. Sabrang also provides social-protection services and legal aid in cases of harassment.

The Sabrang clinics connect community members with suitable

vocational training that leads to livelihood opportunities. "Expectations of housing, income and a respectable livelihood are all basic expectations of any person," says AK Srikrishnan, chief operating officer at YRGCARE, "but for most transgender people economic inclusivity continues to be a challenge."

Understanding and accepting the transgender way of life is not what most employers do, he adds. "Many transgender people have faced immense problems in their lives, and there are considerable gaps in their educational levels." This further excludes them from jobs where a minimum requirement might be finishing school or college.

YRGCARE liaises with organisations that offer life skills and technical training to the community, and then connects them with the CSR departments of companies for jobs. While many transgender people gravitate towards beauty or personal-grooming services, YRGCARE explores other opportunities for them too.

An event at the Pune Sabrang clinic where transgender cards were distributed

The organisation has recently linked up with delivery portals to onboard trained transgender staff in their facilitation centres. In Chennai, members of the community were trained to become drivers and delivery staff. Besides, YRGCARE tries to find homebound jobs to ease the transgender person into the employment world, while helping those who want to branch out on their own.

In search of comfort

Like 26-year-old Shruti, who lives in the Mumbai suburb of Kalyan, and has started her own tailoring unit. Five years ago, Shruti — who was born male — left home when her family refused to accept that she was a woman trapped in a man's body. Unable to be herself either at home or at the bank where she worked, Shruti moved from job to job in various cities, trying desperately to find a place she could find comfort.

"It was torture showing up to work dressed and behaving like a man," says Shruti. "People knew of my situation and I often faced harassment, but I had no source of income or any support once I had left my parents' home. I needed a job and I kept trying different ones out."

Shruti had trouble finding accommodation too. Landlords wouldn't rent to her and she was turned away by women's and men's hostels. "I even lived in a room attached to a tea stall; it did not even have a door," she says. "That was the last straw. I realised I would be better off working for myself than for someone else."

A few months ago, YRGCARE found and enrolled Shruti in a tailoring course. She uses that training to make bags while continuing to look for full-time employment, hopefully in a company that will be more accepting of her. Financial stability has enabled Shruti to take the first steps towards gender-reassignment surgery, to "fully become a woman", she says.

A counselling session at the Sabrang clinic in Thane in Mumbai

"We work around the community's complete needs," says Mr Vasudevan. "Many transgender people today lead healthier, empowered lives with access to healthcare, social protection and livelihoods." They have begun to see the Sabrang clinics — operated by transgender nurses and support staff — as places where they can be themselves, without judgment or censure.

That's not enough, though. "There's a lot of work that needs to be done at the ground level to ensure that people understand why a transgender way of life is no different from a heterosexual way of life," says Mr Srikrishnan. "A transgender person is eager to be accepted, eager to have a marital and family life. They long for compassion, cooperation, education and financial security, just like the rest of us."

Alongside services provided to the community, the Sabrang centres have embarked on sensitisation drives. The clinics at Pune and Thane are located inside medical college hospitals, so the YRGCARE team has started by arranging programmes for medical professionals.

"At the Rajiv Gandhi Medical College and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Hospital, where the Thane clinic is situated, we have conducted training and sensitisation drives for staff and students," adds Mr Vasudevan. "We have similar programmes involving law-enforcement authorities as well." In Hyderabad, YRGCARE's efforts have led to 18 district hospitals in Telangana now instituting wards specifically for transgender people and offering them hormone therapy free of cost.

"Each of the Sabrang clinics is fortified in its own way for people to know that here is a place where any sexual minority can walk in, where they are likely to be helped and supported," adds Mr Vasudevan. "Now with the TG card, they can rightfully say that the government recognises, accepts and endorses them as transgender people. This is already a sort of societal recognition." ■

By Labonita Ghosh

Dilip Thakare, a cotton farmer from Malwada village in Maharashtra's Akola district, has prospered by adopting high-density planting systems

Cottoning on

Cotton farmers in multiple Indian states are reaping the benefits by banking on high-density planting systems to improve their crop yields and incomes

India's cotton sector is undergoing significant change, marked by both pressing challenges and emerging opportunities. While the country continues to be the world's largest cotton producer, recent years have seen substantial reductions in production levels and cultivated acreage. For many farmers, cotton no longer offers the same appeal it once did. Yet, as the story of Dinesh Gulabrao Kale shows, cotton continues to evoke resilience and possibilities.

Till a couple of years ago, Mr Kale would get a yield of 8-10 quintals per acre from his cotton farm in Sanglud village in Maharashtra's Akola district. Then he learned of an initiative to increase cotton cultivation and enhance productivity with high-density planting systems (HDPS) and hybrid cotton seed varieties. The result: Mr Kale secured a yield of about 15 quintals per acre in 2024.

"The yield dipped in 2025 because of the excess rains, but my income from cotton is still higher than before," says Mr Kale. "That's why I have moved from soyabean cultivation to HDPS cotton on my entire 65-acre farm."

Mr Kale is one among more than 4,850 small and medium farmers who have benefitted from a cotton farming initiative that encourages a shift to HDPS. This

allows farmers to grow nearly three times as many cotton plants per acre, with a faster harvesting cycle and lower maintenance costs. The transition can boost farming yields by 30-50% per acre, with a commensurate rise in income.

Among the forces behind this sunshine story are Team Athena, an agri consultancy, and Reviving Green Revolution Cell (RGR), an associate organisation of the Tata Trusts. RGR has, since 2025, been driving the 'cotton mechanisation and innovation consortium' (CMIC), which has brought together multiple stakeholders, among them farmers, seed companies, textile enterprises, academics and farm-equipment manufacturers, to increase cotton cultivation and yields.

CMIC is one of RGR and Team Athena's initiatives to revitalise agricultural livelihoods by increasing farm productivity and profitability. A few years ago, it worked with cotton farmers to tackle the menace of pink bollworm, a pest that destroyed acres of cotton and nearly brought cotton farming to a standstill.

Partners aplenty

The CMIC effort draws inspiration from the success of a project run by the Confederation of Indian Textile Industry's Cotton Development and Research Association (CITI-CDRA) along with the central government's Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and the Ministry of Textiles. Launched in 2023-24, the CITI special project on cotton reached 912 farmers in Rajasthan, 577 in Maharashtra and 3,354 in Madhya Pradesh, covering 3,160 hectares in 10 districts in three states.

The need to provide a leg up to India's cotton farmers has been evident for the last few years. Although India accounts for nearly 25% of global cotton production and has the largest area under cotton cultivation — around 12 million hectares — it ranks a low 38th on productivity. This is because of the low adoption of mechanised planters and harvesting technologies.

Global cotton production expert Kater Hake (extreme right) interacting with scientists from the Punjab Agricultural University

Cotton yields in India have declined by around 20%, from an average of 542 kg/ha in 2016-17 to 454 kg/ha in 2024-25 (the global average is 900 kg/ha). The good news is that the situation is far from irreversible.

Experts suggest that yields can rise to 800–1,200 kg/ha with advanced practices such as HDPS, precision irrigation and improved soil management. This is precisely where the CMIC-RGR initiative is directing its efforts: accelerating mechanisation in cotton farming to enhance cultivation and productivity.

CMIC brings logic and muscle to the cotton value chain. CMIC-RGR has nine core members drawn from diverse sectors, including seeds, crop protection, fertilisers, machinery, textiles and finance.

Apart from Rasi Seeds, which helped conceptualise the consortium along with Team Athena, the members include seed research and development companies such as Mahyco and Seedworks International, crop solutions companies like Crystal Crop Protection and Meenakshi Agro Chemicals, equipment manufacturers Shaktiman Agro and Bajaj Steel Industries, as well as agribusiness multinational LouisDreyfus.

Recognising the need for world-class

Punjab Agricultural University scientists in conversation with cotton growers in Abohar in Punjab

cotton and ginning expertise, the Consortium Secretariat brought on board Kater Hake, a global cotton production and high-density planting expert, and Marinus van der Sluijs, an international cotton ginning and fibre quality specialist.

Multiple businesses were chosen from each sector to reflect India's commercial diversity and to facilitate non-competitive discussions, allowing CMIC-RGR to also advise national and local governments.

At the heart of the CMIC-RGR effort is the globally prevalent practice of HDPS. While dense plantations of high-yielding hybrid cotton enable greater productivity, they must be supported by complementary practices such as the use of plant growth regulators, harvest aids (defoliants), mechanical pickers and pneumatic planters.

CMIC-RGR members are promoting HDPS in cotton farming in India by addressing three key areas: Hybrid-seed genotypes, farm inputs, and farm mechanisation.

An HDPS cotton farm needs compact plant types with uniform boll maturity for efficient picking. CMIC-RGR aims to identify hybrid cotton-seed genotypes for each region based on specific soil and climatic conditions.

For instance, considering the agroclimatic conditions of Punjab, Rajasthan and Haryana, Rasi Seeds is developing region-specific HDPS cotton hybrids. These hybrids are designed to withstand cooler early-season temperatures and variable moisture regimes, ensuring stable productivity. They differ from the genotypes developed for western and southern India, which are optimised for hotter, semi-arid conditions and longer growing seasons.

Earlier, Rasi Seeds developed seeds suited to farmers in Maharashtra and Telangana while promoting HDPS there. Uduthala Venkatiah of Kalakonda village in the Rangareddy district of Telangana is one such farmer. Mr Venkatiah was incurring losses on his 15-acre cotton farm till three years ago, with yields of 5-7 quintals per

acre. After increasing plant density by 30% with HDPS, yields have gone up to 11-12 quintal per acre. "I am satisfied with the output over the last two years; this year, I made a 10-15% profit," he says.

Having prepared the ground, CMIC-RGR now hopes to expand HDPS to more cotton-farming areas. While the CITI-CDRA project grew to cover 5,160 farmers in 12 districts in Western India in 2024-25, CMIC-RGR is planning to scale this further by bringing around 10,000 acres under HDPS cotton farming in this region in 2026 (based on seed availability and project funding).

Potential unleashed

The potential of HDPS to increase cotton cultivation and yields is evident from the success of early adopter Dilip Thakare of Malwada village in Akola district. A prominent advocate of HDPS cotton farming at various government and industry forums, Mr Thakare first adopted the method a decade ago. He increased plant density by three times, leading his 70-acre farm to produce 15-18 quintals per acre against the earlier 5-7 quintals per acre.

"HDPS delivers a lot of benefits," says Mr Thakare. "Earlier, 10 days after sowing, farmers had to fill the gaps where seeds had not germinated. This has reduced with HDPS. Plus, the crop matures faster, before the ringworm effect can set in. Weeding has also lessened."

Mr Thakare has now become the face of what is being called the Akola model of HDPS cotton farming. He frequently travels across the country to educate fellow farmers. Meanwhile, building on his success with HDPS, he leased 500 acres in 2025 to undertake contract cotton farming for the Japanese brand Uniqlo.

For its part, RGR is seeding demo plots and conducting workshops and farm visits to promote HDPS farming. In September 2025, it convened industry leaders at a workshop in Delhi to discuss how they could explore ways of strengthening India's cotton sector by improving productivity and farm incomes through industry collaboration. RGR has also been working on advocacy for government support and policy reforms.

Given its potential to increase yields and reduce costs, HDPS can help make Indian cotton more competitive in the global market, besides reducing import dependence in a protectionist trade environment. The ultimate goal for CMIC-RGR is to make cotton farming more attractive and sustainable for farmers. ■

By Aarti Dua

HDPS: Pros and cons

Benefits

- **Increased yield:** HDPS can significantly boost cotton yields, with one study showing an average yield increase of 24% over traditional methods.
- **Improved returns:** Farmers adopting HDPS have reported higher returns, with one farmer earning an additional income of ₹30,084 per acre despite higher input costs.
- **Reduced reliance on manual labour:** HDPS enables mechanisation, reducing labour dependency and costs associated with harvesting and other operations.

Limitations

- **Availability of quality seeds:** Adoption of HDPS depends on access to high-quality seeds, which can be a challenge for farmers.
- **Mechanisation:** While HDPS facilitates mechanisation, the upfront investment on equipment can be a barrier for small-scale farmers.
- **Regulatory framework:** A streamlined regulatory framework is necessary to support the adoption of HDPS and ensure that farmers have access to resources, incentives, and support systems.

Nilza Angmo and Rinchen Dolma of Shesrig Foundation's conservation team, restoring a thangka painting at Diskit Monastery

Mission: Restore and preserve

A conservation programme in Ladakh is paving the path to protecting the region's historical artefacts and the rich cultural legacy they represent

I have this opportunity to engage with Buddhist heritage in a living landscape where culture, community and the practice of conservation come together," says Alenla Bhutia. That's what being involved with an effort to restore and preserve has done for Ms Bhutia, who has travelled far from her native Sikkim to immerse herself in caring for a precious legacy of immeasurable value to Ladakh and its people.

Restoring historical artefacts of cultural and religious significance is the concern for Ms Bhutia, who is part of the Shesrig Foundation, a women-led art and heritage conservation organisation based in Leh. 'Shesrig' denotes culture and heritage in the Ladakhi language and those are central to the undertakings of the Foundation — and of a Tata Trusts-supported programme to conserve relics and monuments from Ladakh's storied past.

Launched in late 2024, the programme works with monasteries and village communities and has multiple components: the restoration and conservation of thangka and wall paintings and miscellaneous artefacts such as masks; building capacity for the Shesrig Foundation — this includes repairing its art conservation studio at Choskor House, a 200-year-old heritage structure in Leh —

fellowships for two budding conservators; and community awareness projects.

Backing from the Tata Trusts has enabled the Foundation to spread its wings. "It used to be that conservation in Ladakh was what people from outside did with funds they brought in," says Noor Jahan, cofounder and director of the Foundation. "The Tata Trusts grant represents a change; it means we can do a lot of work that we had been aiming to do, principally collaborating with monasteries and communities and training locals in conservation."

What the Foundation has been trying to pull off is anything but straightforward. "We Ladakhis often take our heritage for granted and that is a major challenge," adds Ms Jahan, an alumnus of the Delhi Institute of Heritage Research & Management (and a former national-level ice hockey player). "People have good intentions but then they try to do something that ends up becoming a problem. We have had such incidents with wall paintings, especially."

Development downer

Ladakh may still be picture-postcard pretty, but pristine it no longer is. So-called development, the downside of tourism, climate shifts and a lack of safeguards have hurt the place and its people. What has happened with the region's historical artefacts in all of this is collateral damage.

"Only a handful of us in Ladakh are working in the art and heritage sector at this point," says Ms Jahan. "Our fears stem from the influx of tourists and how we cater to them, infrastructure building and the heavy machinery employed to make roads and the like. Ladakh has a large number of rock art sites, among the most in the world, and we have lost a lot of this heritage due to rampant development."

Ms Jahan bemoans the lack of awareness that leads to such destruction. "Right now everything is out there in the open and that's what makes it more difficult. We don't have a heritage policy in place; there are some archaeological monuments that are protected but there is no protection for lower-category monuments. We have a few private museums but not a single government museum."

Deachen Angmo and Alenla Bhutia, also part of the conservation team, working on an artefact at Shesrig Foundation's studio in Leh

To top off the bad tidings, there's good old-fashioned thieving, that ages-old criminality by which India's cultural treasures have been spirited away to foreign shores. "That has happened in Ladakh as well," says Ms Jahan. "The classic example is this wooden panel that disappeared from the Sumda Chun monastery. It was traced later to a private art collector in London."

The professional side of what Ms Jahan and her six-member team labour to accomplish is relatively less complicated in comparison with the external factors at play. The team has restored 15 thangka paintings belonging to different monasteries in Ladakh. These scroll paintings date from the 16th century onwards and were carried back by monks and pilgrims travelling to Tibet, then a centre of Buddhist learning.

Typically depictions of the Buddha or a

Participants at an event held ahead of World Heritage Day 2025 at Choskor House, the 200-year-old structure in Leh where the Shesrig Foundation's art studio is located

protector deity, the thangka paintings worked on by the Shesrig Foundation needed the recreation of missing or torn bits. Before any restoration begins, the painting is photographed and documented. A treatment plan is then devised prior to the painting's reintegration. A thangka artist is consulted if missing parts have to be added (after referring to religious texts).

The degree of difficulty in the restoration of wall paintings is of a higher order. The work is more complex and it entails travelling with people and materials to remote locations. The Foundation's conservation team has been involved in two such projects: the first at a 12th-century temple in Saspochey village in Leh district and the other at a 14th-century shrine in Markha Valley.

With the Markha Valley wall painting, the local village community had approached the Foundation for help in restoring it. The painting was inside a partially collapsed stupa and the community, a superstitious lot, were afraid to touch it, lest they trigger a calamity or some such. "These were two very different and extreme sites and it was a huge challenge for us, logistically and personally," says Ms Jahan.

Creature comforts may have been in short supply for Ms Jahan and her team. What they did not lack was motivation. "Ladakhi people have their own identity and they have lived by it for all these centuries, through harsh climatic conditions and in very isolated locales," explains Ms Jahan. "These artefacts are attached to that identity; they resonate with us and our culture. I am from a Muslim family, yet they are a part of my daily life. That's why it is so disheartening to see them fade away and deteriorate."

Fostering fellowships

The fellowships instituted by the Foundation — with stipends and accommodation provided — are a way to counter the downslide. This is a three-month programme and two students have come through it in the inaugural year, one from Ladakh and the other from Manipur. "We have kept it at two students because the course is intense; it's tough to

accommodate more people and give them proper attention," says Ms Jahan.

Community awareness initiatives are another facet of the Foundation's endeavour to further the conservation cause in Ladakh. Under this umbrella, a seminar – with monks and village heads in the audience – was organised in collaboration with the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation. Also, a conservation care workshop was held at Disket Monastery, among the oldest monasteries in the Leh area, and an on-site awareness programme in Saspochey village.

"The Shesrig Foundation's efforts to preserve Ladakh's heritage were a natural choice for us to support," says Paroma Sadhana, programme manager, arts and culture, with the Tata Trusts. "They are committed to building expertise and awareness in a remote geography, and they have coped well with a series of challenges. The Foundation's strength lies in the fact that it is led by art conservators from Ladakh, people best placed to advocate for the preservation of the region's cultural heritage."

One of those art conservators is Kunzes Dolma, a Ladakhi and a member of the Shesrig Foundation team. "I believe this project will grow stronger in the coming years," she says. "It will increase community participation in conservation and build local capacity. With continued support, it has the potential to create a sustainable model for heritage preservation in Ladakh."

Nilza Angmo, also a Ladakhi and another member of the team, views the initiative through the prism of Ladakh's culture and traditions. "This programme plays a crucial role in preserving Ladakh's unique identity," she says. "It helps safeguard our monasteries, murals and heritage structures, all of which are integral to our history and our spiritual life." ■

By Philip Chacko

Senior conservator Giri Kumar with the trainees

Conservation boost

Sikkim has been the setting for two conservation training programmes supported by the Tata Trusts in a collaboration involving the Sikkim State Archives and Museum. Held during the summer and autumn months of 2024, the three-month-long courses were aimed at building the capacity of the staff of the Sikkim State Archives and Museums as well as monks, the custodians of important monastic collections in Sikkim.

The first training course was on the conservation of the material heritage of Sikkim (wood and metals). Implemented by the Uttarakhand-based Himalayan Society of Heritage and Art Conservation, this involved conservation practices specific to wood and metals in the Sikkim region. Designed to be immersive and intensive, the programme focused on practical training in conservation science for the group of staff and representative monks.

The second training course focused on best practices in preventive conservation. Organised in partnership with the Kolkata Centre for Creativity Conservation Lab, the participants were largely the same cohort from the first course. They were instructed in documenting objects, identifying signs of deterioration in artefacts, and in undertaking emergency repairs of art pieces.

One of the highlights of the programme was the reorganisation of the storage of the Sikkim State Archives and Museum's collection. This was done in line with the ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) RE-ORG method, a structured framework that helps museums reorganise their storage spaces. ■

NESTING IN NATURE

Tourism can be an exhilarating experience when the emphasis is on roads less travelled, vistas off the beaten track and rooms with more than a view. The community-based tourism project being implemented in Uttarakhand by the Himmotthan Society, an associate entity of the Tata Trusts, ticks all of these boxes and then some.

Launched in November 2021, and with financial backing from MakeMyTrip Foundation and the Tata Trusts to bank on, the project is designed to create an archetype of sustainable tourism. Rural environs are the setting and nature in all its beauty the big draw in a project geared to benefit local communities.

Spread over village clusters in Jadipani (Tehri Garhwal district) and in Makkumath and Ransi (Rudraprayag district), the initiative has fostered the development of 32 homestays — with a cumulative 50 rooms on offer — that are managed mainly by women, who have been provided training and handholding support.

This is a distinctive kind of effort, much different from the traditional tourism fare that envelops — and often overwhelms — Uttarakhand. And it is showing all signs of fulfilling its potential in spades.

(clockwise from facing page top) **A community gathering** during a wedding in Makkumath village in Rudraprayag district. The tourism programme works on the principle that natural and cultural assets are best nurtured through the custodianship of local communities. **Shakuntala Devi** (extreme left), Laxmi Devi, Basu Devi and Pushpa Devi, who hail from Chureddhar village in Tehri Garhwal district, work as guides in the initiative. Capacity building in the programme includes training volunteers from the community to be tourist guides, who can enhance their income considerably come tourist season. **Guests enjoying** evening tea at the Sonakshi homestay in Makkumath. The programme thrives on the belief that today's travellers appreciate authentic experiences that are planet and people friendly.

(from above) **This group** of local women, from Sari village in Rudraprayag district, had gathered for a traditional dance during a community gathering to mark Maha Shivratri, the auspicious Hindu festival. One of the programme's aims is to design tourism products and services that tap into the cultural heritage of the community. **Local guide** Vandana Devi, from Ushada village in Makkumath, with guests on the Akashkamini river trail. On the programme's tourism menu are village walks, jungle and temple trails, farm experiences, cookouts and mountain hikes.

(from left) **Guide Anusuya Devi** (right) with guests on an exploration of hill country near Paab village in Rudraprayag district. Ms Anusuya, a mother of four, joined the initiative in May 2023 after coming through a two-month training course. **Sarla Devi**, a homestay owner from Makkumath, participated in a two-month training course in guiding and hospitality, before becoming part of the programme in May 2024. Among the components of the initiative is the development of village homes into homestays with modern amenities.

(from above) **Village women** preparing a traditional meal for a wedding in Makkumath in Rudraprayag. The tourism project has worked to establish a local connection while creating an institutional arrangement at the village level. **Narendra Panwar** and Arvind Singh, local guides from Ransi village in Rudraprayag at the 140-year-old Rakeshwari Temple during a village walk for tourists.

(from above) **Guests at the** homestay owned by Arti Devi in Makkumath in Rudraprayag. The majority of the homestays in the programme are run and managed by women. **Homestay owners** Ranjeet and Parmila Kotwal (left) with a guest in the polyhouse of their property in Raunlek village in Rudraprayag. Many of the visitors to this homestay are keen on learning local farm practices.

Language and the question of **equity**

There is a problem with multilingual education in India, and solving it is imperative to further the best interests of students and communities

Shailaja Menon is an educator who supports the development of early-learning and literacy initiatives under the education theme of the Tata Trusts.

Akhila Pydah, formerly an education consultant with the Tata Trusts, has been involved with early-language and literacy interventions, teacher education and curriculum development.

Jyotsna is part of the education theme at the Tata Trusts and has more than 15 years of experience in early learning, teacher education and equitable education for marginalised youth.

Malavika Jha, who is with the education design team at the Tata Trusts, has anchored programmes in early education and foundational literacy and numeracy.

Language is a major barrier to equity and quality in education in India. It is estimated that one in four primary grade children experiences a moderate-to-severe learning disadvantage on account of her home language being very different from the language of instruction at school[1].

India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) recommends that, wherever possible, the child's home language be used as the medium of instruction until at least grade 5; and that children be taught three languages (including English) at school. It also recommends that a bilingual approach be used wherever possible.

However, given that the recommendations are not backed by clarity or provisioning at either the central or state government level, multilingual education (MLE) remains an elusive and puzzling aspect of the educational landscape[2]. In this context, it is often left to educational NGOs to problem-solve the nature and scope of MLE programmes on the ground.

To get a sense of the range and nature of MLE in the country, the Tata Trusts undertook a landscaping study between February and April 2025. The study included consultations with sector experts, desk research, field visits to select organisations and online meetings with those working in the domain.

The sampling was representative and not comprehensive, and included five large-scale MLE programmes and nine that were smaller in size. Two of these were state-led initiatives — the Andhra Pradesh MLE programme (discontinued since the state's bifurcation in 2014) and the Odisha MLE programme — the rest were NGO-led efforts. The review was limited to work done with government schools.

A few key findings of the study are summarised here:

1. While experts recommend that MLE be interpreted as a desirable outcome for all Indian children, with the intent that they become balanced bilinguals or multilinguals at the end of their schooling, in reality many of the programmes reviewed focused on tribal language education in the Central India belt. While this is a segment of the population that requires urgent and sustained attention, other segments of the population (for example, inter-state migratory populations; nomadic, coastal, displaced populations; border areas and urban populations) also require attention in terms of MLE provisioning.
2. Most of the programmes reviewed targeted primary-grade students; they did not work with pre-primary students. With more children coming into the ambit of formal pre-primary education, it makes little sense to delay MLE until the primary grade. Otherwise, children learn in unfamiliar languages from the ages of three to six,

Shared reading in a primary school in the Pali district of Rajasthan

and are given access to the familiar home language only from grade 1 onwards. Bringing MLE curricula and pedagogy into *anganwadis* (childcare centres) is a pressing priority.

3. Although NEP 2020 states that children should receive education in their mother tongues (MTs) at least until grade 5 (and even beyond), most programmes reviewed were 'early-exit models' that shifted students to the state language as early as grade 3–4, without a plan to further build student capability in their MTs once the transition was completed. The key aim of such programmes appears to be to use MTs as a bridge to the regional language, rather than to retain or build strength in the students' first languages. The reasons for early exit are multifold. First, the pressing matter of large-scale assessments conducted by the end of grade 3 in regional languages makes it imperative to prepare students in the regional languages early on. Second is the prevalent view that earlier access to languages of higher power is in the best interests of students. And, third, is the lack of teachers and curricula to teach subjects in their MTs in higher grades. While the merits of each of these reasons can be argued, even as per the NEP's own recommendations, it is in the best interests of students and communities if MT-based MLE is made available to students until at least grade 5. It goes without saying that the regional language and English can be taught alongside. The recommendation is to retain MTs as the medium of instruction.
4. Most of the programmes that we reviewed targeted homogeneous language classrooms, where all students spoke the same tribal language (for example, Santhali, Kui or Ho in Odisha). In many of these programmes, the appointed teachers or facilitators knew the children's MT. We found no examples of programmes that ran in mixed-language settings (where children

Student members of the library club at the Ginigera government school in Karnataka's Koppal district

with more than one MT are present). As such, our domain understanding of how to provide high-quality education to students in urban, high-migration or border areas — where multiple languages exist in a single classroom — is minimal.

5. Within the domain of early education, there is little coordination or integration of ideas between organisations working in the 'foundational literacy and numeracy' and MLE spaces. Ideally, these should be continuous and not discrete spaces of thinking and acting, given that almost all classrooms across India include bilingual and multilingual students, and that all MLE classrooms need to be engaged in teaching foundational literacy and numeracy. More attention needs to be placed across early-learning classrooms on developing children's oral languages and expressive writing capabilities, giving children access to functioning libraries stocked with high-quality books in multiple languages, and on providing schools with teachers who are better prepared in the teaching of early literacy and numeracy.

We cannot solve the problem of quality in education without simultaneously solving for equity. While giving students access to high-power languages — such as regional languages and English — is an essential pillar of provisioning for equity, it is also critical to provide students with access to learning in familiar, known languages during their early years to ensure a firm foundation on which further learning can be built.

Provisioning for high-quality MLE is, thus, not an optional issue in a richly multilingual country like India, but an urgent imperative that we need to be working towards. This requires more systemic support from governments, for example, by drafting MLE policies and provisioning MLE-trained teachers and curricula. It also requires a lot more work in terms of developing programmes for use in early-childhood and mixed-language settings. Collaborations between universities, governments, educational NGOs and community-based organisations are vital in the context. ■

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[1] Jhingran, D (2009), Hundreds of home languages in the country and many in most classrooms: Coping with diversity in primary education in India. In Skutnabb-Kangas, T, Phillipson, R, Mohanty, KA, and Panda, M, (Eds), Social justice through multilingual education (pp 263-282). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

[2] Currently, Odisha is the only state that has a multilingual education policy in place, but even here quality of implementation remains uncertain.

These women farmers from Palojori in Jharkhand's Deoghar district were part of a social development programme run by Collectives for Integrated Livelihood Initiatives, an associate entity of the Tata Trusts

Measured matrix

A robust 'monitoring, evaluation and learning' framework is critical for evidence-driven social development programmes to realise their full potential

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant increase[1] in the number of NGOs in the global development sector, with more than 490,000 in India alone. Alongside the growth of these NGOs is a transformation in their size, scope and mandate.

No longer confined to small-scale service delivery, NGOs today are critical development actors with complex roles and responsibilities, including mobilising resources, designing and implementing programmes, and holding governments responsible.

However, a persistent constraint remains for NGOs — chronic underfunding. Research describes this as systemic deprivation or a 'starvation cycle', driven by donor funding models that prioritise programmatic spending while limiting investment in essential internal capacity development.

A study by the Bridgespan Group[2] highlights a worrisome paradox: NGOs are expected to deliver impact at scale without the resources to enhance the staffing capabilities required to do so (figure 1).

The study underscores the importance of capacity strengthening for strategic planning; monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL); and talent and leadership development. These are key enablers for achieving programmatic outputs and important drivers of impact. Philanthropist Amit Chandra[3] puts it succinctly: "Capacity building has a return on investment that is a multiple of programme investments, and is often self-sustaining."

India's philanthropic ecosystem is slowly addressing this challenge. Dasra's India Philanthropy Report 2023 notes that 90% of 'Inter-gen and now-gen' philanthropists are open to catalytic

Sohini Mookherjee
is the project director, special initiatives, at J-PAL South Asia.

approaches such as long-term funding, collaboration and knowledge sharing. Its 2025 report further shows that Indian diaspora families are increasingly providing flexible funding to grassroots NGOs.

Although capacity-building opportunities funded by donors span many organisational priorities that are critical for the success of NGOs, it is MEL that plays a vital role here. MEL enables NGOs to generate evidence, learn from programme implementation, course correct in real time, reallocate limited resources, and scale programmes that work, ultimately shaping the effectiveness of donor investments.

Capability building

Donors must invest in MEL, rather than leave it to be self-funded by grantees. Translating this intent into practice requires Indian philanthropy to finance long-term MEL capability building as a key feature of programmatic funding, particularly through flexible and unrestricted support.

Drawing on nearly two decades of CLEAR/J-PAL South Asia's MEL capability-strengthening experience with NGOs of various sizes in India, as well as with governments, we have found that a 360-degree organisational lifecycle approach is most effective.

When learning takes place across programme design, implementation, evaluation, and scale-up, instead of episodic compliance, adoption is much stronger. Traditional donor-funding structures rarely support these integrated approaches and largely remain short-term with respect to programme components.

MEL capability strengthening requires sustained engagement because the use of evidence is a behavioural and organisational change process, not a one-time technical input or knowledge transfer. Training staff and disseminating tools may provide information, but that does not guarantee evidence-informed decision-making.

Our experience shows that the availability of evidence — a dashboard or report, for instance — is often mistakenly equated with the use of such evidence. Sustained capability strengthening allows learners to live through decision cycles with trainers, providing hands-on support as they grapple with real-time trade-offs, incentives and constraints.

This is not unique to NGOs. Governments face the same organisational challenges, including leadership buy-in, incentives, decision cycles, and competing priorities, making the underlying capability-building constraints fundamentally similar across stakeholders.

When we draw from our government MEL capability-strengthening portfolio, which has a lot more examples of success for this lifecycle model — because of the availability of early funders — it offers lessons that apply to NGOs as well.

A long-term capability-strengthening model is effective because evidence use depends on behavioural and organisational change, an insight into human behaviour and approaches towards learning that are generalisable[4] to NGOs.

This approach has been central to our long-term engagement with the Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN)[5], with whom we have been working since 2012. Our engagements with GoTN over the years, covering MEL diagnostics, training, advisory, impact evaluations, and policy-research dialogues, have helped embed evaluation into its planning and decision-making processes.

Capability emerges through iterative learning-by-doing, when organisations receive support not only to produce evidence, but also to interpret, deliberate on, and apply it at critical junctures. This is

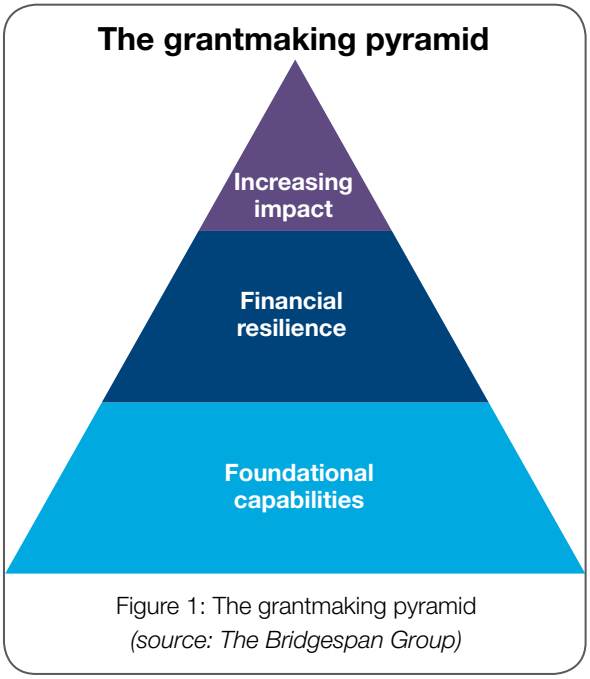

Figure 1: The grantmaking pyramid
(source: The Bridgespan Group)

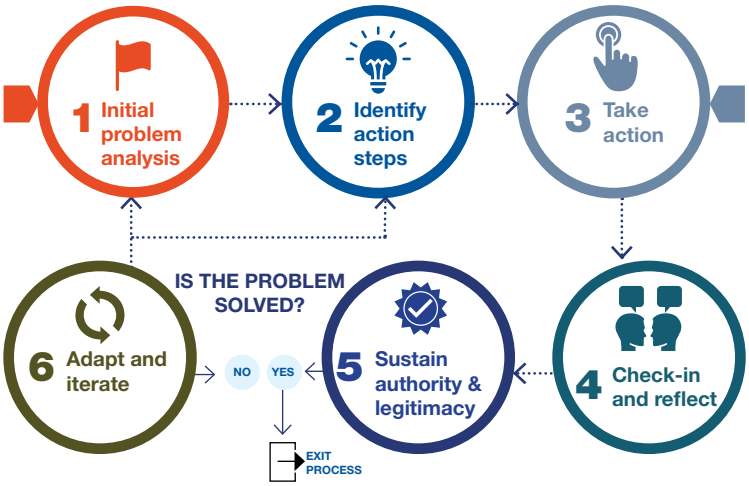

Figure 2: Lant Prichett's problem-driven iterative approach

something that one-off training or short-term technical assistance cannot achieve.

GoTN is financially investing in our long-term MEL partnership. However, this success required strong donor commitment during the early years from the CLEAR Initiative and the Global Evaluation Initiative, which understood the purpose of investing in government MEL portfolios.

Effective MEL use also requires leadership and an organisational buy-in, not just donor-mandated reporting frameworks. Capability-building efforts falter when MEL is treated as a top-down donor accountability exercise, rather than in the spirit of learning to further improve programme delivery.

As Co-Impact's Shagun Sabarwal argues[6], "Local is best." Too often, capability-building programmes follow the requirements of the global donors instead of equipping nonprofits to respond to their unique contexts or the needs of the community.

J-PAL South Asia's post-training tracer surveys further reinforce this: over 55% of our NGO participants are self-funded, with 47% reporting that financial constraints, limited staff capacity, and lack of leadership buy-in prevent them from applying learning in practice. Without sustained ownership and multiple touchpoints over time, MEL capacity building will remain episodic and fragile, regardless of training quality.

Supply-side limitations further limit progress. India has organisations such as India Leaders for Social Sector and The/Nudge Institute that provide structured support for fundraising or leadership development. However, hands-on and dedicated long-term MEL support for NGOs remains limited[7].

Even short-term MEL providers are limited. J-PAL South Asia has delivered short-term MEL courses to Indian NGOs for close to two decades, including for grassroots organisations reaching upwards of 200,000 participants, yet we see that demand continues to outstrip supply.

Six lessons on building MEL capabilities in NGOs that last:

1. Capacity is not capability: Capacity is evaluation 'hardware', providing tools and templates, and training that builds technical capacity, but not the ability

for evidence use. MEL capability emerges only when such evaluation 'hardware' delivers results, that is, through leadership buy-in, decision-making routines, and organisational norms that underline evidence use.

2. Training individuals is inadequate without an organisational framework: MEL skills cannot be applied in isolation. Donors must invest in organisational systems – dedicated MEL roles, internal learning forums, funding Management Information Systems and data analysis, and integration of evidence into planning and budgeting cycles.
3. MEL capability building requires behavioural change – and that takes time: As we have learned, workshops rarely lead to organisational change unless supplemented with leadership commitments, follow-ups, accompaniments and multiple touchpoints. Communities of practice and sustained technical advisory matter more than one-off workshops.
4. Avoid one-size-fits-all MEL frameworks: Lant Pritchett's principles of 'problem-driven iterative adaptation' apply as much to NGOs as to governments (see figure 2). Rigid indicators from donor-mandated frameworks often undermine learning. NGOs need space to adapt MEL systems to local problems and contexts instead of adapting cookie-cutter approaches and best practices that may have worked in a specific context.
5. Invest in strengthening long-term MEL ecosystems, not just one-off programme activities of organisations in the short run: Sector-wide infrastructure ultimately enables sustainable MEL capability – peer learning platforms, shared curricula, evaluator networks, and partnerships with donors, NGOs and research institutions. Individual grants on discrete project deliverables cannot substitute for ecosystem investment that ultimately enables evidence use by NGOs.
6. When MEL supports the programme lifecycle of NGOs, it enables scale and sustainability: When MEL runs parallel to the programme lifecycle from project conceptualisation or design to programme implementation, evaluation and scale, organisations can test their priors early, adapt during delivery, and leverage evidence in their scale-up journey. Ultimately, MEL enables programmes to scale impact, upholding the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of programmes.

If donors want to invest in programmes that stick, they must move beyond funding MEL as a reporting requirement and enable evidence use. MEL capability building is pivotal in this transition that often gets neglected in funding decisions. This requires long-term engagement with flexible funding and a shift from demanding evidence to building the ecosystem under which evidence can be generated, used and sustained. ■

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[1] *The Role and Contributions of Development NGOs to Development Cooperation: What Do We Know? By Nicola Banks*

[2] *Building Strong, Resilient NGOs in India: Time for New Funding Practices. By the Bridgespan Group*

[3] *Why is there a collective silence around capacity building? By Pritha Venkatachalam and Amit Chandra*

[4] *The Generalizability Puzzle. By Mary Ann Bates and Rachel Glennerster*

[5] *Investing in evaluation capacity development in India: Why it matters now more than ever. By Aparna Krishnan and Shagun Sabarwal*

[6] *Local is Best: The next revolution in the history of capacity Building. By Shagun Sabarwal*

[7] *What nonprofits need from capacity building programmes. By Manjula Ramakrishnan, Shreya Kedia and Vijaya Balaji*