

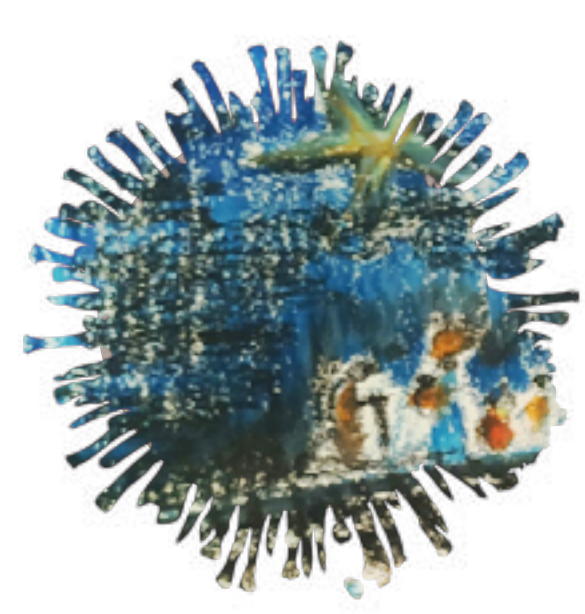
THE NEW

Within me, around me

FRIEDRICH
EBERT 
STIFTUNG

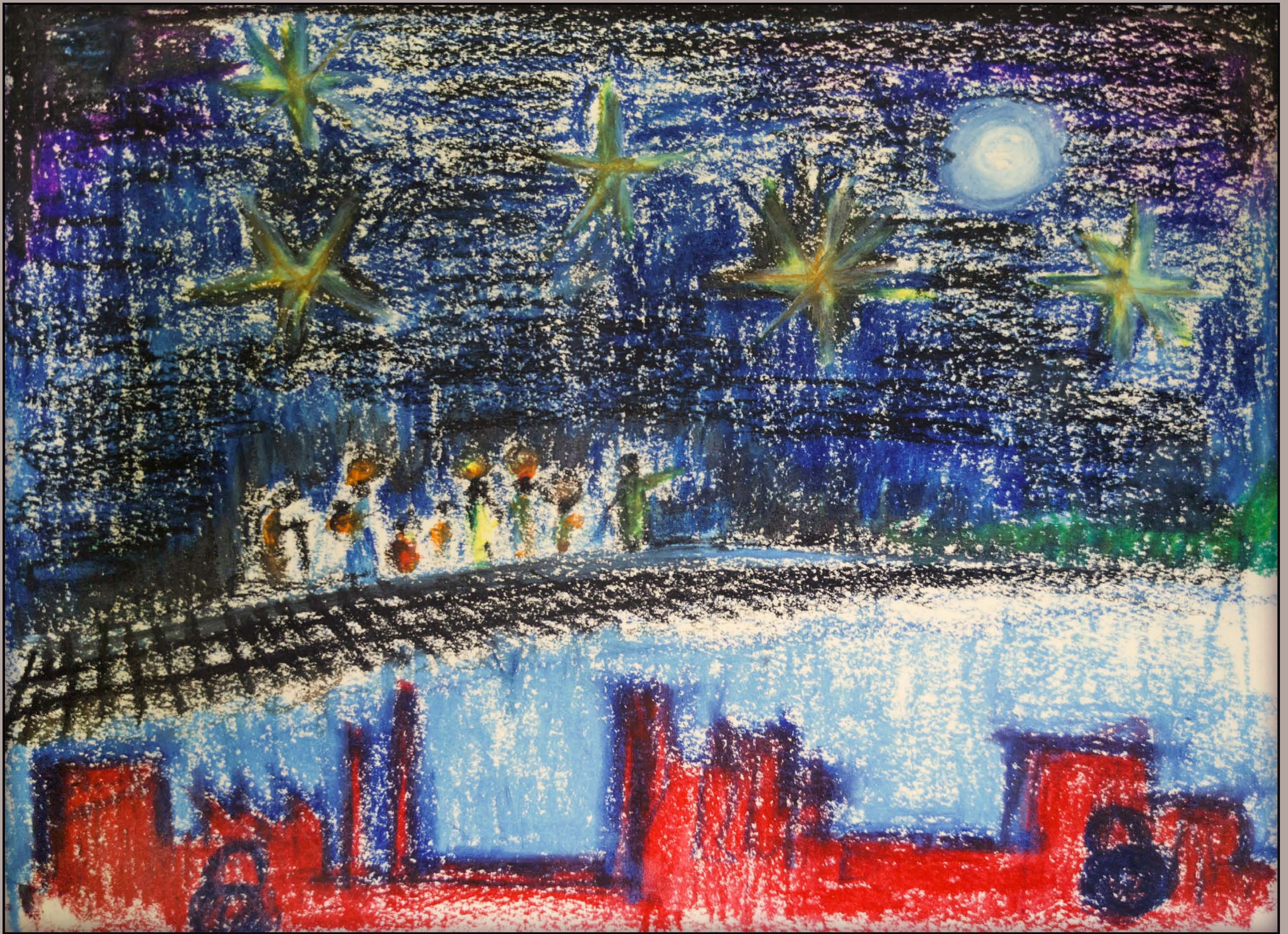
NORMAL

THE NEW NORMAL



within me, around me

FRIEDRICH
EBERT 
STIFTUNG



About the cover art: *The City Bleeds* by Aditi Kundu

As the lockdown was imposed in India on March 25, 2020, its impacts were different for people across different segments of our society. It resulted in an exodus of migrant workers undertaking arduous journeys back home. Their ordeal was partially visible through social media, television, newspapers, and in a few cases, from the balconies or windows of the urban households. How could nobody imagine that millions of migrants across the country would be rendered jobless and probably homeless and hungry? While the privileged city dwellers were busy tackling their woes of being trapped inside their houses, most of us failed our fellow countrymen and women by turning a blind eye towards their pain and agony.

The City Bleeds is a depiction of a gruesome incident when sixteen migrants died on the tracks near Aurangabad on May 8, 2020. It shook the conscience of the nation. The sketch depicts that the blood of the migrant is not on the railway tracks but on the apathetic cities.

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P R E F A C E



“The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found, but made; and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.” – John Schaar

It began simply enough. Locked in our homes, a small, eclectic group of us began to connect ‘virtually’ once a week, exchanging ideas and experiences and discussing our anxieties, challenges, and hopes.

**For most people,
the pandemic has been
a magnifying glass,
exposing the ugly reality
of India’s deeply
divided society...**

A reality we had all known and had mostly ignored. Now, with the media finally focusing on what the migrant labourers were facing, the terrible plight of the daily wage earners etc., we were forced to acknowledge that our society is based on deep systemic inequities and injustice.

Everyone was waiting for this time to end; for things to get back to ‘normal.’ But not the normal we knew...a new normal, based on the kind of world we wanted to see. We decided to write about what this world would look like. But not only that. We also wanted to explore how to reinvent ourselves, to transform into what we, as individuals, had the potential to become: how to be the change we wanted to see.



‘The New Normal – within me, around me’ was the result.

We had a rambling conversation online, discussing our ideas, probing deeper into what each of us was experiencing, and this conversation became the base for this e-book. The subjects ranged from gender equality to architecture; from democracy and youth leadership to food; from design to redefining the meaning of success.

The reader may find these pieces whimsical, prosaic or even utopian. But these are the longings and dreams of a small group of people who desperately want a different world – one based on equity, justice, a love for this planet and all living things. And who are willing to work towards it.

The first step towards a better future is imagining the possibility of it. We hope you will find these reflections inspiring and engaging.

Gulan Kripalani
2021



FOREWORD

“We have a normal. As you move outside of your comfort zone, what was once the unknown and frightening becomes your new normal.”

— Robin Sharma (Author of *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*)

Let us start with how it starts these days—the pandemic.

How the pandemic has affected people, lives across the world, and how unprepared we still are though a year has passed, are now common knowledge. So common that no conversation of ours these days is complete without facts, figures, and anecdotes of how we are living it.

This phase, as put by many, is the “New Normal.” Not only in terms of how we are living, behaving, thinking (or not thinking in some cases), but a paradigm shift of global scale is being experienced by humanity. We are setting newer standards of living, practising newer ways of transactions and exploring novel platforms for experiencing the unknown. A tsunami of this new has left most of us overwhelmed and anxious. Mainly because we were rushed into it, unannounced and ill-equipped.

And while we thought the new normal would not last beyond a few weeks, unpleasantly, it is here to stay.



A collective of change-makers—called the Forum for Responsible Building—has been working on ideas for creating such paradigm shifts for many years now. Equipped with technical know-how, practical experience, and above all, progressive values, this collective has conceptualised and implemented innovative designs having the potential of positively impacting our lived realities, and in the current scenario, even easing us into the new ways. However, as the pandemic struck, the collective was itself caught in the middle. The new reality led us to rethink our ideas, our understanding of the world, and, more importantly, question our beliefs. Shaken, stirred, we sat together every week (online, of course) and poured our naked thoughts, honest opinions, moments of truths, and confused perspectives in front of our colleagues.

This e-book is an exposition of those very conversations, individual reflections finding resonance in the collective psyche. Opinions and sentiments cannot be expressed in a formal set of codes or guidelines, and hence, each thought is unique in its expression.

All the thought pieces stem from the realisation that within this new normal—during and post-pandemic—the need for a value-based discourse is felt more than ever.

The idea of this e-book is not to proclaim what a new normal should be but to share the collective's reflections in a way that would find synergies amongst similar collectives, who are also ideating and planning for sustainable and inclusive ways of co-habitation. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is a proud co-traveller of this collective, facilitating the exchange of ideas in building a just and inclusive society. We believe this e-book will provide much-needed inspiration and the hope that this new normal will change the world for the better.

Mandvi Kulshreshtha

2021



THE CIRCLE

ADITI Kundu stands for integrity, truth, and compassion for herself and others. A trained architect and a teacher by profession, her firm belief that the process of learning and growth should never cease for anyone makes her a student for life in pursuit of knowledge

ANURAG Shanker stands for social justice, democracy, and equality for himself and others. He likes to call himself a reformed Management Guy who saw the light before it was too late. After eight years in the software industry, he decided to do something a bit more inspiring.

ANJAN Mitra stands for balance and harmony in nature and designed interventions. He believes in empathy for humanity as a whole—practising, exploring, evolving this ethos through engagements in various private and public initiatives. Retrofitting and value-adding to existing systems lie at the core of his design approach.





ASHISH Mehta stands for respect for himself, the planet, and all its inhabitants. Ashish is inspired by the passion and dedication of socio-ecological change-makers and is excited about the opportunities to create sustainable impact.

CHANDRA Bhakuni stands for love, compassion, and charity for himself and others. With training as a building technologist and a structural engineer, Chandra has been practising for the last 20 years in disaster mitigation, community development, design and construction projects.

GULAN Kripalani stands for equality, justice, and integrity for herself and others. A transformational leadership practitioner-coach, filmmaker, theatre buff, Gulan spent decades doing pioneering work in the development communication field in India and around the world.

KABIR Vajpeyi is a son, brother, husband, father, and a friend. A practicing architect and a social entrepreneur, he works towards developing responsible social infrastructure. He stands for non-violence, peace, empathy, integrity, equity, and dignity for himself and all.

KAVYA Arora stands for courage and compassion for herself and others. As a trained environmentalist working on developmental issues, grassroots work has been her greatest teacher – inspiring her to live a life around principles of sustainability and holistic wellbeing.

MANDVI Kulshreshtha stands for equality and justice for herself and others. She is an urbanist and a feminist. She is currently working as Program Adviser - Economy of Tomorrow at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung India office. She is interested in social, economic and ecological aspects of development policymaking.

NEERA Kathuria stands for hope, compassion, and equality for herself and others. After working as a freelance graphic artist for almost 15 years, she shifted her focus to teaching four years ago. Currently, she is teaching Indian and World Art history as a guest faculty at NIFT Raebareli.

PINAKI Roy stands for equality, dignity, compassion, and harmony for himself and others. A trained social worker, Pinaki believes humanity, to survive on the earth, must align with nature and transform systems that don't. He is exploring ways of bridging systems complexities in the inner and outer worlds of individuals.

PREETI Vajpeyi, Ph.D., has worked extensively on creating child-centred learning ecosystems for schools and Anganwadis in India, particularly for marginalised stakeholders. She is an academician, researcher, author, consultant for organisations like UNICEF, central and state ministries. She has trained multiple stakeholders, including IAS officers at LBSNAA, field workers, teachers, and engineers, on child-friendly social infrastructure.

SABINA Suri stands for simplicity, creativity, and a gentler footprint on the planet for herself and others. Trained as an architect and urban designer, Sabina is passionate about social issues, and her interest areas include research on humanisation aspects in communities. An avid traveller, Sabina enjoys sketching, gardening, and cooking in her spare time.

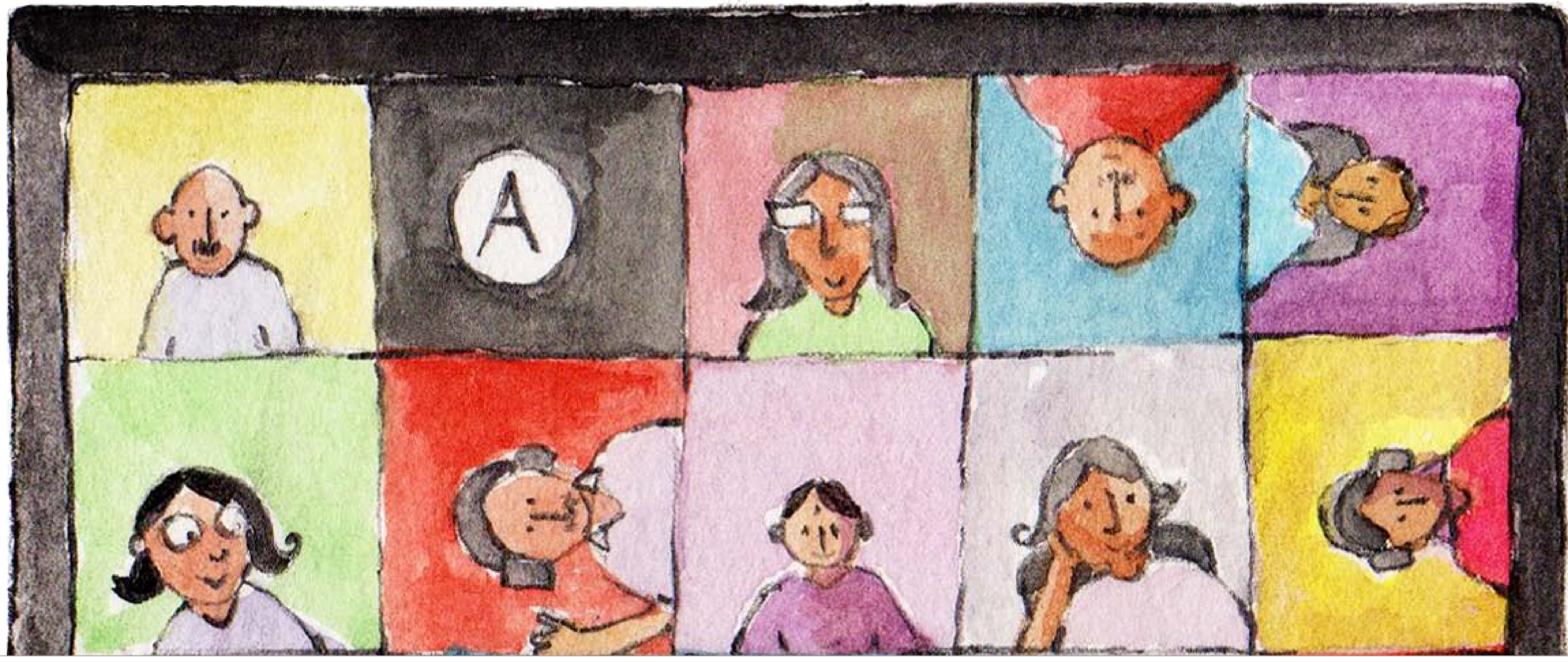
SANJUKTA Mukherjee stands for social justice, compassion, and wisdom for herself and others. She is a social entrepreneur and co-founder of SDRC, which primarily focuses on sustainability research, women's empowerment, and livelihood generation. A U.S. State Department alumni with over 20 years of field experience, she has served as Deputy Director in CII and ICC in her previous profiles.

SATRAJIT Sanyal stands for humility and wisdom for himself and others. Formerly having served in senior Chambers of Commerce profiles, including as Deputy Director in CII's Leadership Centre of Excellence, he is a social entrepreneur, entrepreneurship mentor, business strategy coach, and sustainability assurer, mentoring women-led small business clusters through his non-profit social enterprise.

SWATI Negi stands for love, truth, sincerity for herself, and others. She is the founder of a Dehradun-based design collective called In-sans, which focuses on sustainable architecture using natural materials. She received her experience with earth building through her association with experts like Satprem Maine (Auroville Earth institute) and Sonam Wangchuk (SECMOL).

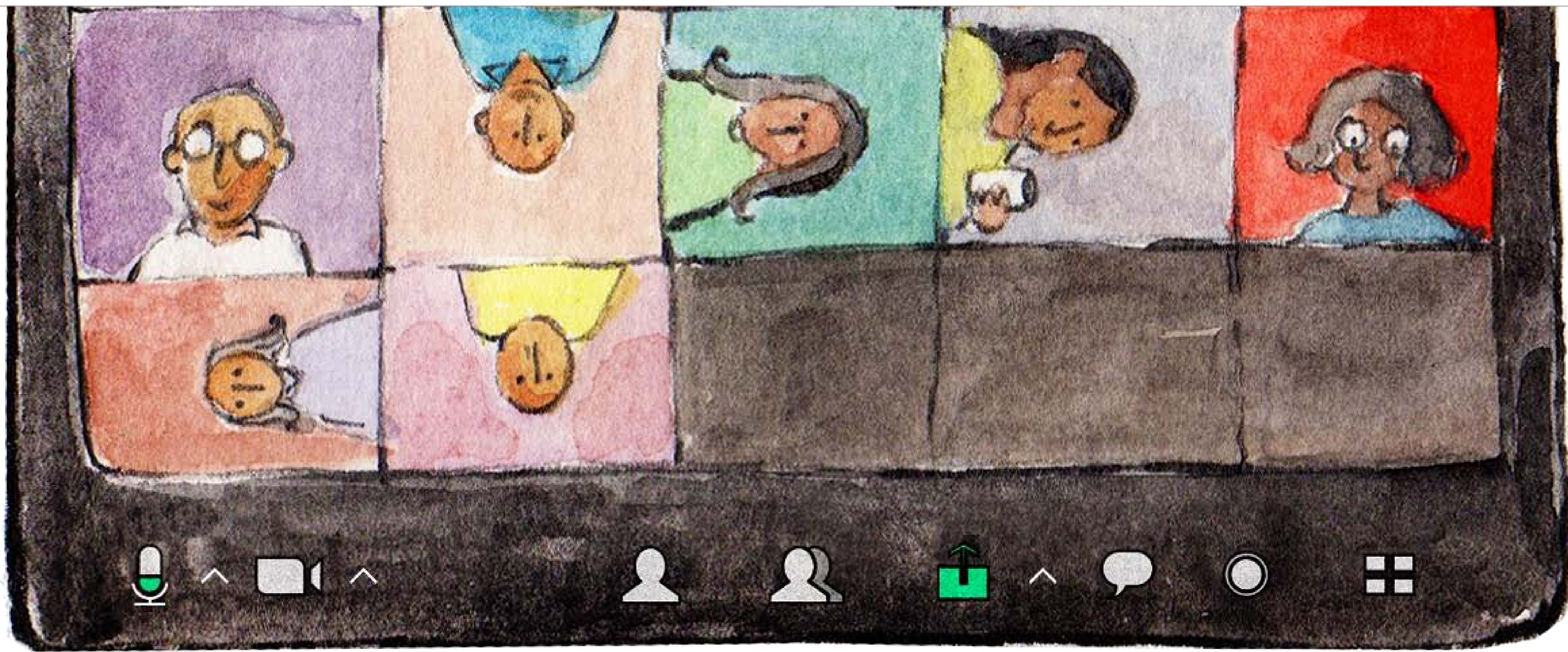
TANISHA Tiwari is an architect in Almora city, exploring its tangible and intangible heritage. Research work and implementing live projects on heritage awareness and conservation in Almora makes her feel most connected and satisfied. She is the founder of ADDA Almora, which converts Multi-Layered Packaging (MLP) plastic waste into eco bricks.





LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCES

What we learned about ourselves that surprised us



Sabina: The thing that surprised me most in this period was my calmness through it all and my energy level.

Mandvi: For me, it was adaptability. Like how quickly I could adapt to the new circumstances without much fuss.

Neera: For me, it was discovering my leadership skills. I was surprised by my calmness. We suddenly had an extended family in the form of a few students stuck with us. Leading that team, which had members ranging from an 8-year-old to an 80-year-old, I discovered that I did not hesitate to take the reins.

Anurag: I learned that I could be more patient. Just listen, get honest feedback, and try to learn from it. I learned the importance of helping. In my society, there are a lot of elderly people who are from my granddad's generation, because of COVID-19, I have tried to help them.

Ashish: What surprised me the most is how much clarity I have in deciding what is essential and not. That binary is quite clear. That this is a must-do or this is not a must-do. I usually feel it is a struggle, so that was surprising.

Preeti: I realised that I can remain positive, and I never thought that I have such high energy levels. I also realised that I am pretty good at out-of-the-box thinking, which I am very happy about.

Anjan: I had this hunch that given time if I could dive down deep inside me, I would be able to connect the missing dots. This time has helped me to see what is happening.



Kavya: The lockdown has given me the luxury of putting in effort to change things that have drained me in the past. The smaller things have inspired more joy and gratitude in me than before.

Tanisha: I have been a nature-loving person from the start, but I never knew that I could connect with nature in ways I connected this time. Now I have gone into deeper layers. It was surprising. I discovered myself during the COVID-19 time and it feels like I am alive. I always thought that my work makes me happy, but during this time, I felt that all the small things that are happening in my life, even when I am hugging a tree, something that I have started doing every morning – make me happy too. It is a different experience.

**I felt that all the small things
that are happening in my life
... make me happy too**





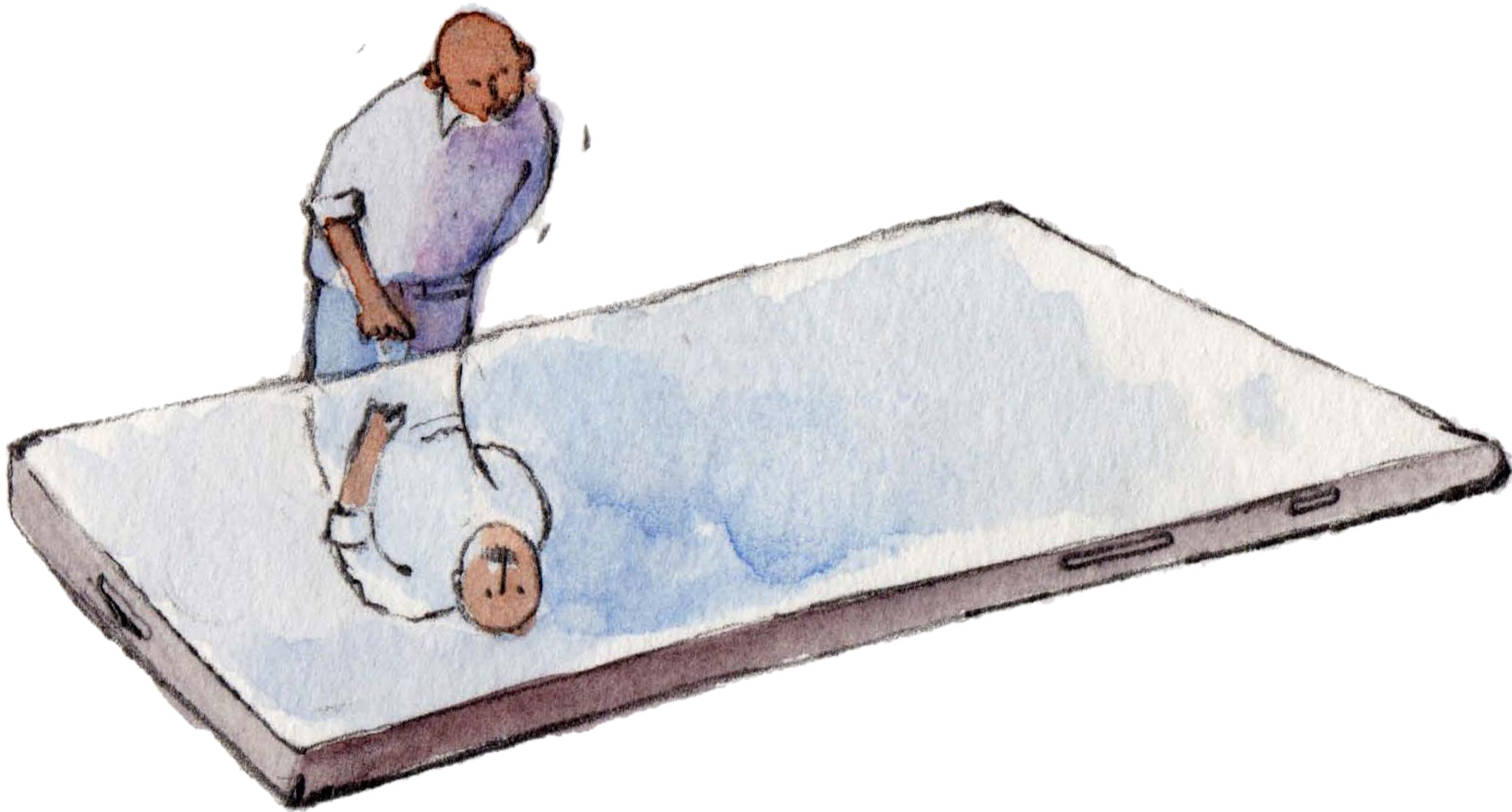
Satrajit: I was surprised about my degree of preparedness. Even for something as simple as keeping the correct medicines and stocking food, I saw that I was ready. I did not expect that I would be this prepared for a calamity of this magnitude.

Aditi: I have all kinds of things in my house, especially things I have collected from various parts of the country. I have been very proud of the way I have decorated my house. Somehow during this lockdown, all of it made me feel so stupid. I have dumped a lot of stuff from my home in the storeroom. I have changed my sense of aesthetics, reprioritising where labour should go in. Labour should not go into dusting stuff. Let there be dust! That was my realisation.

Swati: I think one of the most surprising revelations was to realise how compatible my granny and I could be. We shared a wonderful time – the first time I did so, although we had been living together in the same house for a long time. Because of our different personalities and the generation gap, I never thought it would be possible for us to have the kind of conversations we have had; I discovered we have similar thought processes. I show her my AutoCAD drawings and my 3-D software, and she teaches me how to farm, so it has been really nice.

Sanjukta: I rediscovered my resilience. I was surprised that I could bring in a lot of strength in terms of persistence.

**I learned about the need
for deep silence...
a strong need sometimes
just to unplug.**



Pinaki: I was surprised how quickly I shifted from a state of alarm to a state of calm. I was very careful and, at the same time, started not taking life very seriously – in the sense that even if something happens to me, the world will still go on. I stopped taking myself very seriously, but my mind has been buzzing with things to do and the urgency of it.

Kabir: I learned about the need for deep silence, and what surprised me was that in the process, I started cutting myself off from everyone else. And that continues. I would not take phone calls from anyone. Initially, there were a lot of WhatsApp messages. I stopped looking at them, and that continues. I think there is a strong need sometimes just to unplug.

Gulan: I discovered that I enjoy my own company. I have rediscovered the joy of being able to read for hours without interruption. I thought I needed a lot of outside stimuli, but apparently I am OK with not having it too. It surprised me; it is not what I thought about myself.



**...it is encouraging
that we adapt
and look inwards
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that we need to cope.**

Gulan: You know, I am astonished by the following words not being mentioned: lonely, depressed, cut-off, sad, and the like. None of us said any of that. It is extraordinary how we all found some strength in ourselves. It is surprising because it has also been a time of being disconnected, and it is encouraging that we adapt and look inwards to find the strength that we need to cope. There is a lot of despair around, but it is wonderful to know how resilient we are as a group.

CONVERSATIONS ON THE NEW NORMAL

Design

Social Distancing

Labour, Caste, Inequality

Food

Democracy

Building Youth Leadership

Success, Prosperity, Growth

Being the Change



CONVERSATIONS

Gulan: We have spoken about the strengths we have discovered in ourselves. So, what stops us from trying to create the world that we dream about if we have all this strength within us? I am not in any way suggesting that is all we need; we need a hell of a lot of other things to happen for that world to come about, but what stops us from going all out to work towards a world that we want to see?

Kabir: I realised my engagement and intensity was lacking somewhere. I watched some documentaries about Mahatma Gandhi. One thing that was so remarkable, visible, was that he did not wait for anyone before being in action himself. To see that man in action was the biggest lesson for me—an old man, not waiting for anything, just going ahead.

That was a big inspiration. I think the engagements that he had cut across the board - with a small child, with a mob, with people in a different country who were hostile, with some of the highest powers in systems, in governments — were engagements of a very humane kind. That was an eye-opener for me. I realised that what I need is engagement, to be able to act without waiting for the ideal conditions.

Satrajit: I am not inhibited about going to that world. It will take a lot of time, and it will be a perilous journey, but I am already on it.



I realised that what I need is engagement, to be able to act without waiting for the ideal conditions

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What stops
me is myself...
Nothing else,
nobody else.



Neera: What stops me is myself. Nothing else, nobody else.

Tanisha: When I was writing the new normal text, I was feeling that because I am changing, everyone is changing. But since the lockdown is over, the old frameworks and patterns that others had have come back. I think that my surroundings and my society is stopping me.

Preeti: COVID-19 has brought many inequalities into focus, and that makes me feel guilty. While I sit in an air-conditioned room and work, there are migrants on roads; when we have meals, there are people who have lost all means of livelihoods. It is bothering me a lot, but I am also overwhelmed with the complexity of the issue and do not know where to begin. Of course, donations are a band-aid kind of an approach. There are deeper, complicated issues. The question is, how can I address them through my profession, my skill sets? That is a struggle.

Mandvi: I was very comfortable in whatever situation, wherever I was. Sadly, it needed a crisis to jolt us out of that comfort zone and realise all these things. It is a bit embarrassing to think, why have we not thought of this before? Yes, I think it is sad, and it is our own complacency (that stops us).

Swati: What stops me is my perception and projection of the ask from me as an individual. What am I expected to do? I am supposed to be successful, professional, earn a certain amount of money, live a certain lifestyle. These are things which are part of the unsaid stories which seem to have been written down, and that is where I feel it is incompatible with what I believe should be normal. It should be normal to live the way nature intended us to. Living the kind of lifestyle that we live these days does not feel very natural to me. I feel, we are expected to play our roles in those stories. I think that applies as a collective also; most of us get stuck in those narratives.

Kavya: I think that the only thing that stops me from creating the world (I want) is the fact that I did not want to work on myself. The day I decided that I have it in me to change what I do not like, I can lead by example. That does give me the kind of hope that change is just around the corner.

**I was very comfortable
in whatever situation,
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us out of that comfort
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these things...**

DESIGN

“Language
brings into being
the possibility of that
which was not there
before.”

Re-imagining Infrastructure Development and Design in India

Preeti and Kabir Vajpeyi

“When we walk (like we are rushing), we print anxiety and sorrow on earth. We have to walk in a way that we only print peace and serenity on earth... be aware of the contact between your feet and earth, walk as if you are kissing the earth with your feet.”

- Thich Nhat Hahn

Printing Peace or Printing Pain: When birds weave nests or ants build anthills, they kiss the earth gently. From earth come the twigs, water, and sand – and go back gently to the earth, once the birds fly away, or ants relocate. The earth’s cycles are maintained. No waste is created.

But humans mostly print pain on earth through their activities, like buildings, especially the non-vernacular examples. Construction industry is the most polluting, most resource guzzling industry in the world. We have dug earth, cut trees, created mounds of rubbish, polluted rivers, and destroyed habitats. And most importantly, we have created waste. It sits for years, like a festering wound, poisoning everything around it.

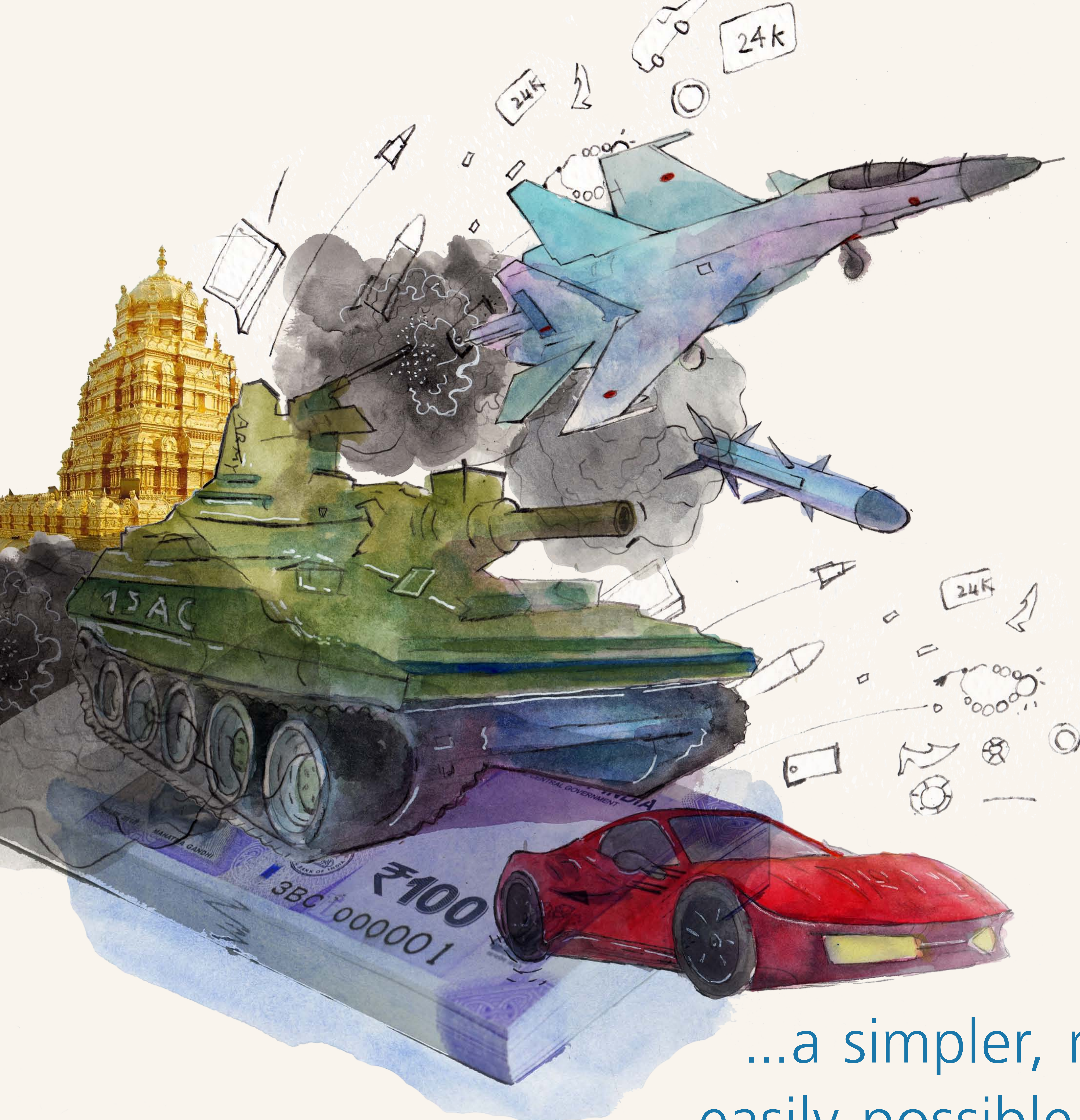
Whether one likes it or not, most acts of human infrastructure building are, unfortunately, acts of destruction. They are driven by a very human-centric approach to survival and thriving, of greed, of productivity, of efficiency, often with disregard to nature and all its constituents.



Infrastructure building employs unskilled to highly skilled people and is a big source of livelihood for a large cross-section of the society. Many projects claim to be 'green' or 'environmentally sustainable,' though they still consume nature, perhaps differently or to a lesser extent. These are still neither zero nature-consuming entities nor use completely reusable or up-cycling materials. Despite its enormous livelihood prospects and the green tag, if what an infrastructure project creates is a hazard to life in the long run, then what should the future course be?

Chasing barren dreams: The prince and the pauper both had dreams. The prince dreamt better, bigger, beautiful, bolder citadels to pamper his ego; the pauper dreamt of a better life for his children. Here comes the dichotomy and inequity. The 'prince' represents those who plan, design, manage, use the infrastructure. 'Paupers' are those who construct it – the artisans, the labour. They get basic livelihood and live in unsafe and unhygienic conditions, never enjoying any social infrastructure for themselves.

During the lockdown, since March 2020, this was quite evident. The prince remained protected and safe; they did not do enough to address the dichotomy and inequity, nor did they create any 'safety net' for the paupers who actualised their dreams. At the same time, it was the humble paupers who saved the day for all – the sanitary staff, vendors, farmers, the grocery boy, the milkman, technicians, the underpaid police officials, the overworked government hospital staff, the plumbers, the electricians, and so on.



...a simpler, no-frills life is easily possible and possibly much better.

The pandemic has given us the opportunity to reflect. Do we need better budgets for medical care, affordable housing, educational institutions or should we continue spending billions on purchasing weapons of mass destruction, luxury cars, gold plated temples and swanky jet planes?

Respecting boundaries: Our burgeoning habitats are pushing nature further. It is said that perhaps the virus jumped the species from animals to plants and infected humans, as their natural habitat was lost. It goes on to show how incredibly unsustainable our model of development is. As a species, we are heading towards our doom if we continue on the same path. We have to learn to respect our boundaries and boundaries of all species in the ecosystem.

The lockdown is an excellent opportunity to take a pause and introspect. There are already signs of nature healing itself. It is reported that the Yamuna river is cleaner now; the air is clearer in many cities. There are birds on trees, fishes in rivers, and there is less seismic noise.

COVID-19 has also shown us that ultimately you just need a few basics to survive with dignity—education, health, food, connectivity. It does not matter if you are a prince or a pauper. It has also made us realise that a simpler, no-frills life is easily possible and possibly much better.

We must use this time effectively to create space for ideas, consultations, dialogues, research, and actions to devise better ways of living for the future. One which is more humane, equity-based, one that ensures peace, addresses poverty and hunger by ensuring dignified livelihood to all. And above all, that allows nature as a whole to sustain and thrive. It is time for course-correction.

In the domain of design, there have been many aspects that touch us daily, for instance:

- Design and technology should **save time**, but this may not be entirely true. Using, maintaining and keeping it alive can take up more time than it would save. And it may create new, unsolicited, unnecessary demands on time.
- Then there is the **planned obsolescence** – designed life of a product that has to be discarded since it may no longer be useful. Or ‘use and throw’ approach where a part cannot be repaired; it can only be replaced with another one. All modern-day electrical and electronic devices, appliances, vehicles, and other consumer goods are classic examples of planned obsolescence.
- Even designers are culprits in creating building programs that are wasteful, exorbitant, ostentatious, and non-optimal. Whatever may be the driving force (e.g. greed), it has substantially increased the **consumption and depletion of nature**, to the extent that has been unheard of in the entire human history.
- Many modern-day, apparently cost-effective technologies **hide the actual cost**. The seemingly cheaper price entices buyers to buy more, without realising its implication on the hidden hand and exploitation of nature (in terms of exploited child labour, underpaid labour or hazardous workplace). This hidden cost needs to be made visible and valued appropriately.

Infrastructure development, design, and technology are a means to an end, and could be used as vehicles for meaningful human development.

Our model of development needs to shift from anthropocentric to nature-centric. We must not forget that it is humans who need nature – nature does not need us!

Here are seven ideas for short-term and longer-term interventions.

Additionally, there is a need for integrated planning between different domains.

- 1. Shut down all new infrastructure construction (government or private) till a robust, responsive way of building is discovered and systems are brought in place.** Unless we take this drastic decision, we will not be forced to think of better ways. We have already built enough—good, bad, ugly, adequate or inadequate, affordable or unaffordable, irresponsible or responsive, functional or dysfunctional. Will it mean job loss for those in infrastructure development? No.
- 2. Use this time and all available pool of skills and knowledge for conserving and restoring—repairing/ remodeling/ realigning/ re-imagining all existing infrastructure for better and effective use—for better equity and better quality of life.** This can be done across the length and breadth of the country, including every tribal and rural habitation or urban conglomerate. Conserve and restore what we already have. Broadly, the cost for new construction is 70:30 – 70 being material, 30 being labour. The cost for repairing/remodeling/realigning is 80:20 – 80 for labour, 20 for the material. Lesser use of material translates to lesser pressure on nature. The labour can contribute to planning, designing, managing, supervision, the actual restoration, and repair or remodeling work. The skill sets of workers, who have gone back home as well as those who stayed back, could be effectively utilised for this purpose. The use of technology-based mediums of communication and coordination could facilitate this process. Existing government programmes and other schemes could be converged to generate meaningful livelihood. This would also require workers to build up on the existing skills and develop or acquire new ones. Given the enormous human potential of *jugaad* in the subcontinent, this will not be a difficult task.

Why restoring/ remodeling/ repairing?

It addresses multiple objectives in one go – environmental, social as well as economical.

- i. It uses fewer materials and hence, less depletion of natural resources.
- ii. It reduces material consumption, hence is energy saving, also in terms of transporting material.
- iii. It builds on existing skill sets of people – wherever they are.
- iv. It becomes more labour and employment-intensive, with the potential for generating and sustaining livelihoods.
- v. It helps in improving the delivery of essential services through augmented infrastructure.

3. **Strengthen the quality of all the core services that ensure dignified livelihood, food and water security, good health, adequate child-development, good education, participative planning, social inclusion, etc.** Remodeling/ realigning/ reimagining should be extended to social services as well, parallel to infrastructure remodeling. Decentralised decision making, strengthening local institutions, creating ownership and stake of stakeholders, developing capabilities of local stakeholders to cope with new emerging realities should be part of this vast process. All existing social infrastructure of health, child development, education, governance and other public activities should be aligned to this endeavour.
4. **Design for durability and life. Design products that can be repaired and upgraded. Design must embody fairness and reflect real costs. The idea of waste must go out of design and product vocabulary.** Products should use only reusable and upcyclable material. This should become the benchmark for good design and its certification.
5. **Continue research for sustainable human habitat** — research can be carried out for rural, peri-urban, urban contexts in different geo-climatic situations. Regional planning, rural planning, urban planning should work together to address this. Any infrastructure development, as part of this planning, should be based on nature-centric models. Existing local wisdom and knowledge should be widely shared. Teaching in engineering and architecture must focus on, as the first principle, building with nature. It must also focus on revitalising what exists in sustainable design and construction.

Teaching in engineering and architecture must focus on, as the first principle, building with nature.



6. Enhance research on the effect of Electro Magnetic Field (EMF)/noxious energies on ecosystem. We have to beware of the increasing EMF radiation and the impact of noxious energies on our well-being. Despite research proving increasing health hazards of EMF on our well-being, this remains an unaddressed area. A blind run for making everything online may lead us to greater disasters. To address this, we require more research, funding, and policy support. Online, net-based solutions must not be considered the panacea until supported by authentic research.



7. Make smart cities or self-reliant villages. Both cities and villages should be made self-reliant, sustainable, robust, livable, and humane. Increasing urban sprawl needs to be addressed through re-imagined urban planning. Urban farming should be encouraged through innovative practices for self-reliance in food production. Walk-ability should be enhanced, and land-use should permit more humane work and life conditions. Similarly, villages should be made self-reliant, self-sufficient, and sustainable entities, with avenues for local employment.



Gulan: Kabir and Preeti, I found this concept of human infrastructure ‘printing pain on the earth’ a very evocative and powerful image. You have raised many questions and suggested many extraordinary and radical changes. How do you see your roles in this blueprint that is so compelling?

Kabir: There are new realities that are emerging. It is not the final document at this stage. I think, as a society, we have become too human-centric, and in many ways, have let nature be consumed by us. Even during the first 30 days of lockdown, it was evident that nature was healing itself, and that it does not need us. It can heal on its own if we just leave it the way it is. I think that message was clear. How unempathetic we have been even as architects—about nature, about people, and other aspects—became apparent. So, stopping any new construction is probably one way to buy some time to reflect and not devastate nature more. But obviously, we are dealing with a reality where the livelihoods of a large number of people are dependent on construction; we cannot simply take a break of that kind. We could, alternatively, go for re-purposing, remodeling, or re-appropriating what is already constructed. It does not require that much material to be extracted from nature. There will be less transport, less energy consumption, and hence, less damage. Most of the existing set of skills can still be fully utilised.

The other reality was the kind of inequalities that were emerging so starkly and sharply. It was evident that social services like health, education or development of women need to be strengthened. They need to be strengthened in those hinterlands where people have gone back.

**re-purposing, remodeling, or re-appropriating
what is already constructed...does not
require that much material to be
extracted from nature**



Preeti: Everything revolves around humans as a species. We are not thinking of development in terms of multiple species and the entire ecosystem. That was the primary cause of why the pandemic occurred in the first place.

We are working on a project on WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) in Rajasthan, and we visited a few districts just before the lockdown. Districts like Barmer have no water. Despite this glaring reality, many people are still conceiving of WASH infrastructure in terms of designs that would work in the context where there is enough water. We know that if it is implemented in such a form, it will just create a graveyard of toilets. So much of resources, labour and money will be consumed and still, it will not function.

I think I would like to respond more responsibly to the new emerging reality. Focus on what exists to make it more responsible rather than build new. There are wonderful paradigms of WASH infrastructure that were traditionally being followed in Rajasthan.

**Focus on what exists to
make it more responsible
rather than
build new.**



They do exist, but we sort of negate a lot of traditional wisdom, and we try to come up with all kinds of solutions which may not respond to the context so well.

Kabir: Rather than wait for something else, we decided to include it as part of our work. While designing a specification for something to be carried out in the field, we are making sure that it involves local skills, no matter what. We are not recommending any central procurement of stuff. We are trying to develop specifications, designs and modifications, which will essentially employ skills of people from the local area. And it focuses on reappropriation of what exists and not on new construction. Rather than waiting for someone else or for the government approvals (on these ideas), we create these examples and let others follow.

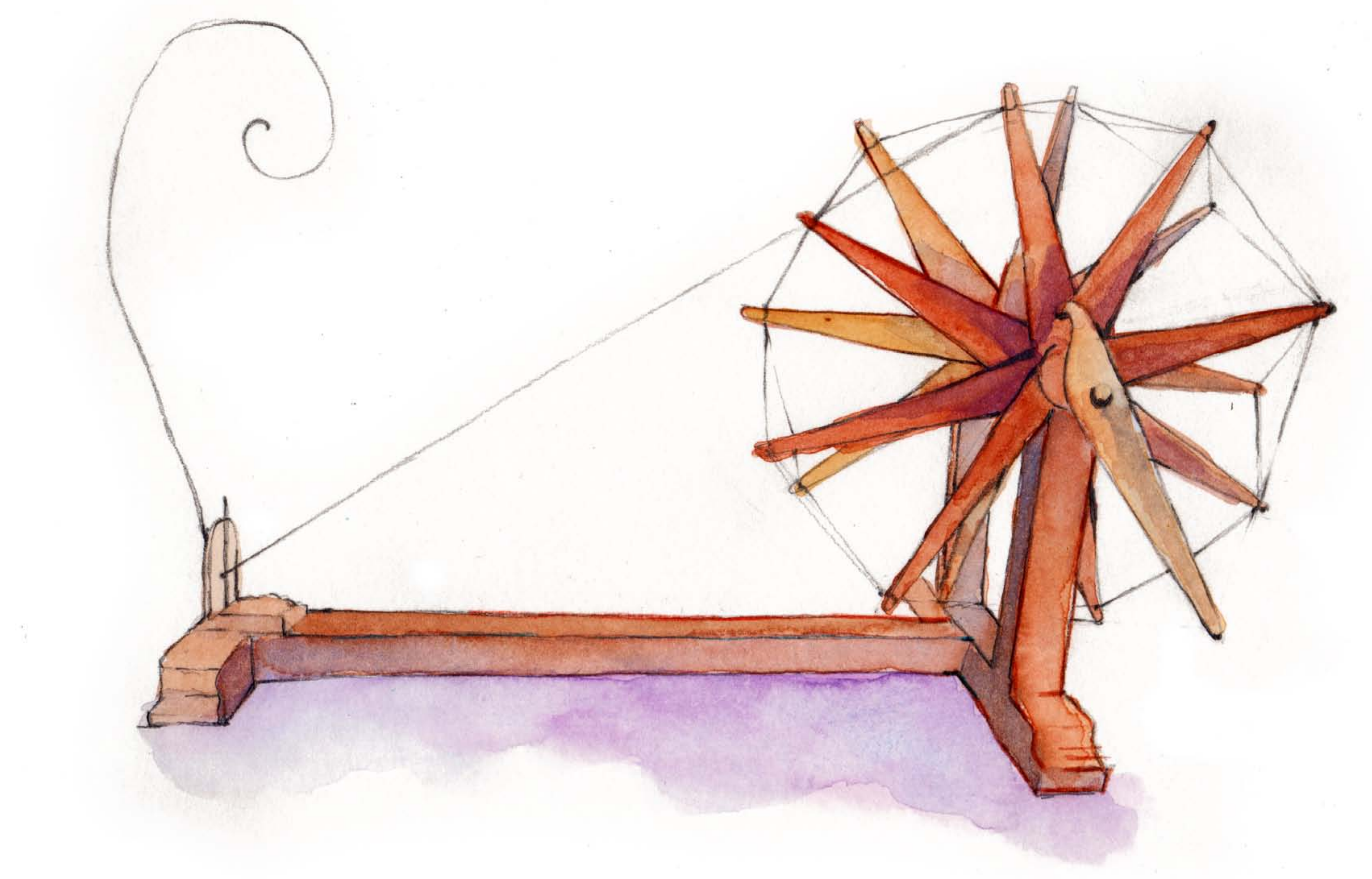


**Rather than waiting...
we create these examples
and let others follow.**

Anjan: Design is basically about making appropriate choices. We are making choices every day for most of our necessity, for fulfilling our desire, meeting our aspiration, our lifestyle, etc. These are continuously contested and negotiated based on our circumstances, capacity, culture and values that we have accumulated or cultivated. Design is always a collective act and has the power to influence and impact its context, users and nature around it. This power has made design profession responsible for identifying the right choices so that human interventions become more resilient, sustainable and holistic.

So, design is not an individual bias or an opinion but rather a process of collective discourse that is purposeful and a balanced act. Take Durga *Puja* Festival as an example where the city of Kolkata transforms into an unusually rich cultural expression. It is a collective act where various stakeholders participate through collaboration and co-production. This brings the realisation that a lot of creative potential is available in any given context. We just need to acknowledge it and the constraints it represents and engage them in a meaningful way. A design professional is one who is aware, sensitive and responsible for triggering this process of engagement to seek something extraordinary. It is like exploring peoples' own potential to transform. In the conservation projects I undertake, I am trying to employ only local people and use only local materials supported by traditional wisdom so that they can evolve a decentralised logic of sustenance. A sustainable future in a given context is possible if one can effectively negotiate the design process that has respect for nature, environment and human values.

People often do not realise their potential; it is when you talk to them, help them, dialogue with them, that they come up with a sustainable solution.



Lessons during lockdown

Anjan Mitra

Only a change in our thinking process can guide us to a post-COVID-19 India – a future that is full of opportunities and possibilities. The coronavirus is not a curse. It is nature’s warning to the futility of our present-day practices and beliefs that have made development a linear and wasteful process. It is a chance to rectify ourselves. Nature is crucial – the natural rhythm is a necessary condition for sustainability. Balance and harmony are vital. We have to change the paradigm of development from a mode of displacement to accommodation and evolution.

Decentralisation of ideas, acts and activities—as a central concept of democracy—is essential for equitable distribution of resources, benefits and sustenance. The value of education must be oriented towards imparting knowledge and disseminating wisdom about the importance of nature, human history, responsibilities, science and the ways of engaging and improving it. Instead of competing, education should encourage students to cooperate in creating, sharing, and giving together. Compassion, empathy, tolerance are essential virtues.

We have a lot to learn from what is positive in our traditional wisdom – the Indian ethos of life, its cultural narratives and stories. We need to relook at our heritage (human interventions, acts and expression), i.e., tangible and intangible in its totality and treat them as assets—bearing clues for future development—as a process of empowerment and acknowledgment and as a viable, sustainable business model.



India is very heterogeneous
in terms of education, consciousness,
social structure, culture, world views...
Therefore, standardisation is useless.

Design and Planning as disciplines need to be redefined for collaboration, co-production and seeking of value-addition. The ways in which we perceive life and engage with the built environment vis-a-vis with nature and imbibe Indian *jugaad* mindset for innovation and out-of-the-box thinking should be encouraged. For example, vernacular architecture offers a repository of knowledge and can provide models for design innovation for balance and harmony. Similarly, encouraging retrofitting, which is a spiral - conserving, restoring, reinventing and therefore, gainful – can open up new opportunities for skill development.

We need to reimagine our understanding of skill development. The informal economy is broken. The impact on migrant workers has been devastating. What happened to the urban poor was telling. Science and technology are a double-edged sword and can be potentially harmful especially if not geared towards empowering humanity. Unbridled urbanisation is detrimental to the overall development and is inhuman.

The recovery process must not take recourse to consumerism because that is fundamentally unhealthy for any society. In the recent times, the role of mass media in India has largely been questionable and directionless. Instead of acting as conscience keepers, some media houses have invested in creating disinformation, misinformation and suppressing public opinion. Social media has immense power over the human mind, but it does not represent the full reality.

India is very heterogeneous in terms of education, consciousness, social structure, culture, world views, beliefs, and technology. Therefore, standardisation is useless. Our policies, development models are, in reality, geared to benefit the elite few. Unless people providing thought leadership in India – across fields, including in politics – truly appreciate the diversity of realities that coexist to form India and factor them into the way our administration functions or how infrastructure gets structured, our ability to tackle such a pandemic will always be limited.



At a more personal level, the new normal that I would like to see:

Within me

- Make it a passion to pick up new hobbies and interests.
- Practice patience and tolerance as strengths.

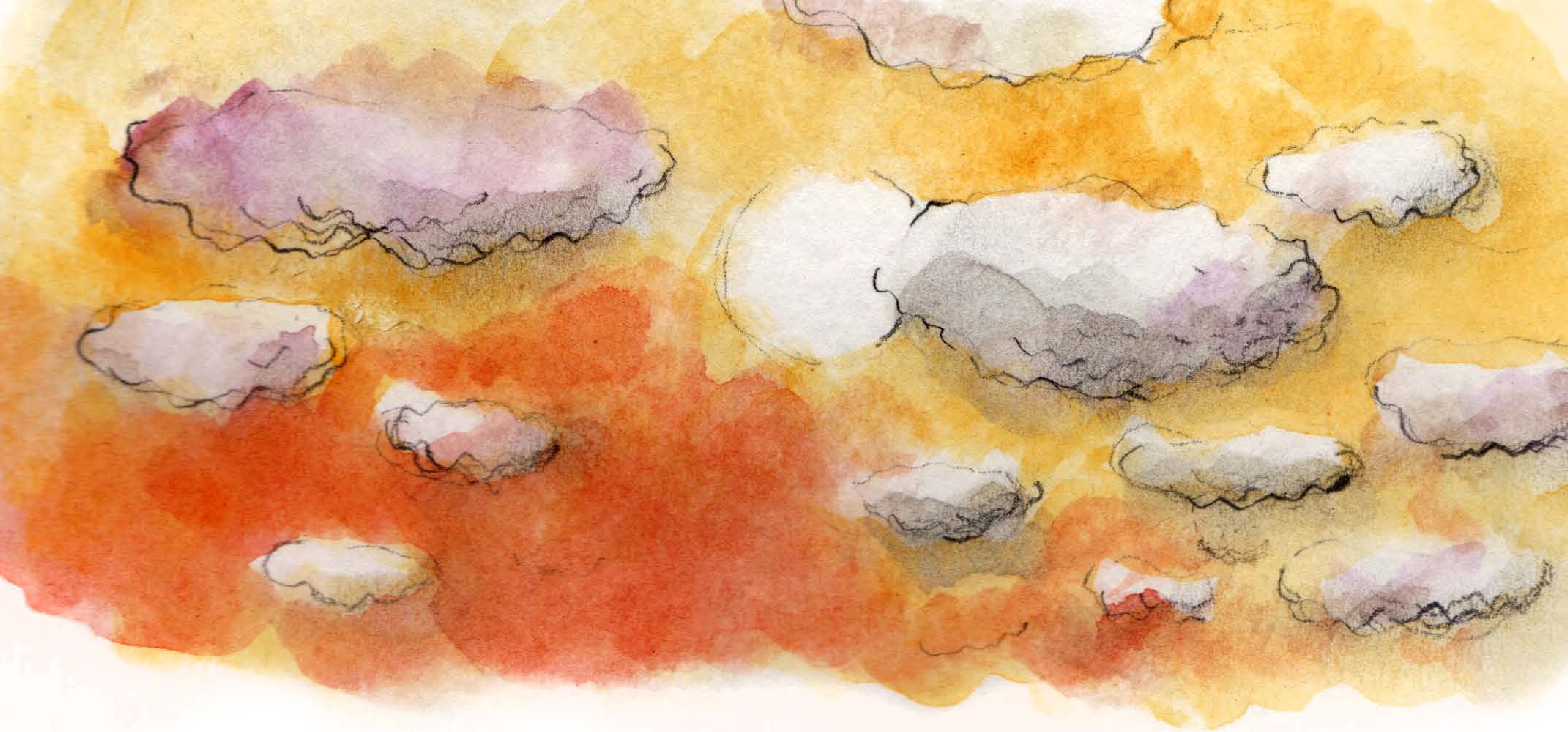
At home

- Accept that household work is not boring or demeaning.
- Cooking is a collective engagement, a cultural act.
- Entertainment lies in being together, following our passion and in creative thinking.

In the community

- Daily essentials and basic services (including health services) must be locally sourced as much as possible.
- Local institutions like clubs or post offices must play a critical role as hubs for facilitating community development and communication.

Anjan: Design helps people channelise their potential. People say that old houses are not functioning well, so you have to demolish them and make new ones. Our logic is, whatever is not functioning in old houses, we can change that. Making design approachable to even a local community is what will change things.



Tanisha: People are smart enough to understand. Making the connection is what the designer should do. People are getting connected, and local people are exploring what talent they have. Our mindset is always like, “you won't be able to do this...this cannot be done by these people,” “they are locals.” We realised that we are always underestimating them. So now it feels like it is worth doing a single project at a time and doing hands-on work with them and exploring what talents they have, what skills they have, and getting those into the design. No matter how small these talents and skills are, it is worth it.

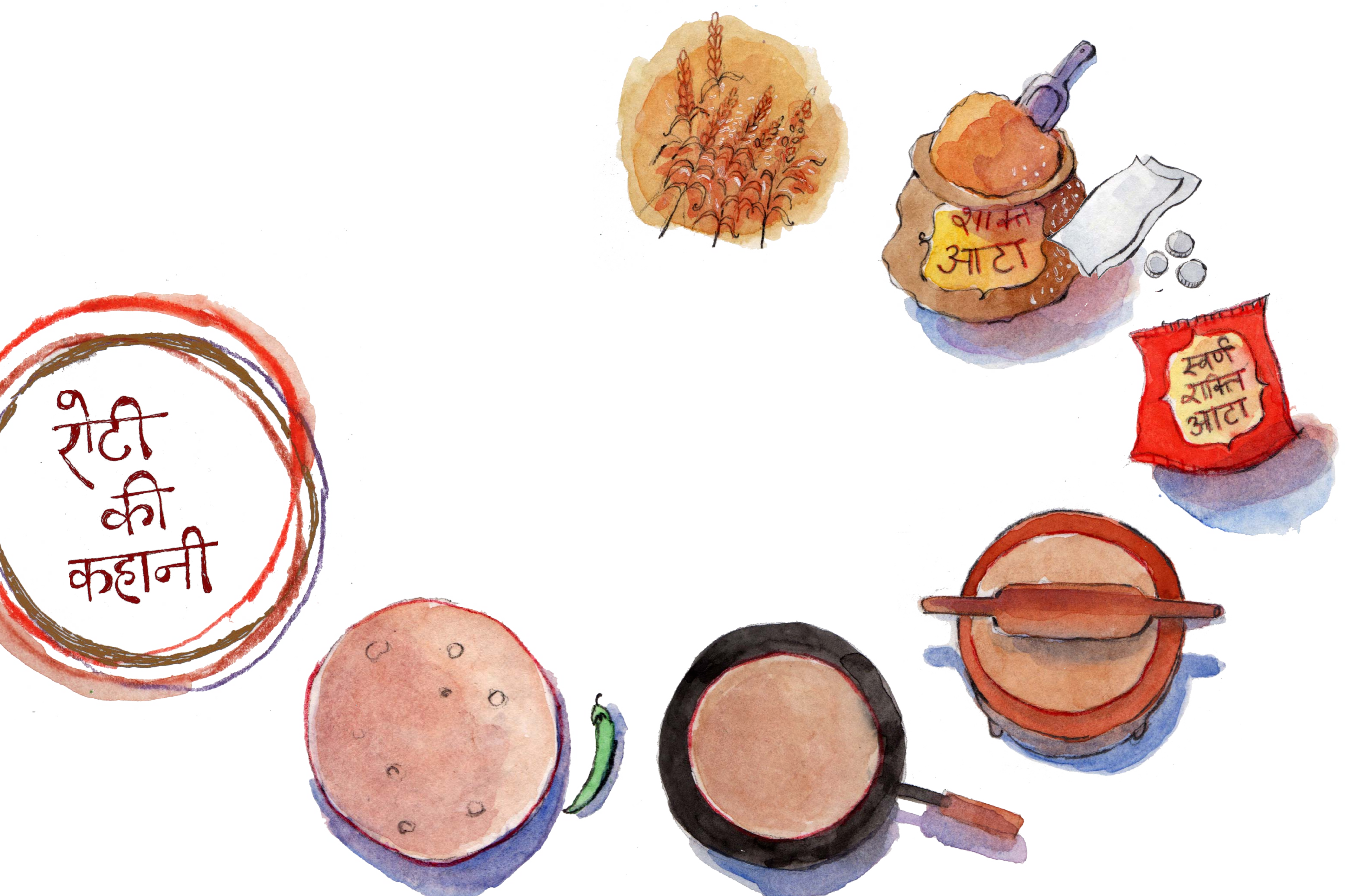
Kabir: We are groomed from a particular domain or a specific kind of skill set and look at the whole world from that perspective. This time has also taught us to look at interconnectedness in a holistic way. Very often, we categorise and compartmentalise a problem—more for the sake of understanding, maybe—to focus on a particular aspect. But while taking it forward, it is important to connect it with other strands, and look at it in a holistic and interconnected way. And when we are trying to work out a solution, keeping certain things porous and open-ended so that other strands can also join in. I think that has to be a deliberate process. We all will have to come out of our comfort zones—of just being in our domains—and see how other domains are linked to what we are doing.

It is like each profession, each domain, also whispering about the other as we move around. I think this whisper is very important because it makes us realise, ‘oho so this is what they are saying over there, so we should think about it.’ It may not be so easy to start with because we are so trained to work in our silos, but I think it is important now to understand this in an integrated way.

Gulan: I remember I was working a long time ago with an organisation that was looking at changing the way children are taught (and the importance of integrating and connecting). Shanta Gandhi, who was a great educationalist, had written something called *Roti Ki Kahani* (The Story of Bread). She said,

“you talk to the child about the *roti* that she is eating and take her back to how that *roti* came to be on her plate, and through that, you will be able to connect history, geography, science, mathematics, biology, not to mention dignity of labour.”

Different things can come in merely by talking about the *roti*, and I have never forgotten the importance of recognising the interconnections in all that we do.





Chandra: There has to be a harmony and a balance which has to be sought. Music is in the air if you try to listen to it. You have to let the learning happen by itself. Unlearning has to happen for learning to take place and this is where music and all these tools come into good use. It is about personal imbibing and letting others have space. We can look at the sky because it does not have a boundary; it is an amazing place just to get a perspective. The music will come from there.

**Unlearning
has to happen
for learning
to take place...**



A wish for the world

Chandra Bhakuni

Literature,
Art,
Music.
Is all I want around me

What I want the new normal to be—within me and around me
Within me?
Hollow, hollower, hollow me
Air, water, metals
from the earth, sky
turn my insides.
So, I build a wall
and walls over the walls I call it membranes,
Light boys light
And fire is all we need.
Oh yes, money, it is the money I need,
For the future which anyway will return, to be.
The parasite in danger,
So many in it together

Sun, sun 🌞

🌞 light, sunlight

🐛 sunlight

Caterpillar nowhere in sight,

Is spring over?

Community medicine I remember now

of a meeting with the Epidemiologists of Odisha,

Remind of the office window, 2nd floor,

And the arrangements hereby,

tea stall

To shout to the *paan* shop

Outwit the parasite

Lockup yourself indoors

shout to next

outwit the parasite

And wish for the world 🙏 outside

S O C I A L D I S T A N C I N G

“
We build communities
in a manner that **people**
from different strata would
never interact
with
each
other
...”



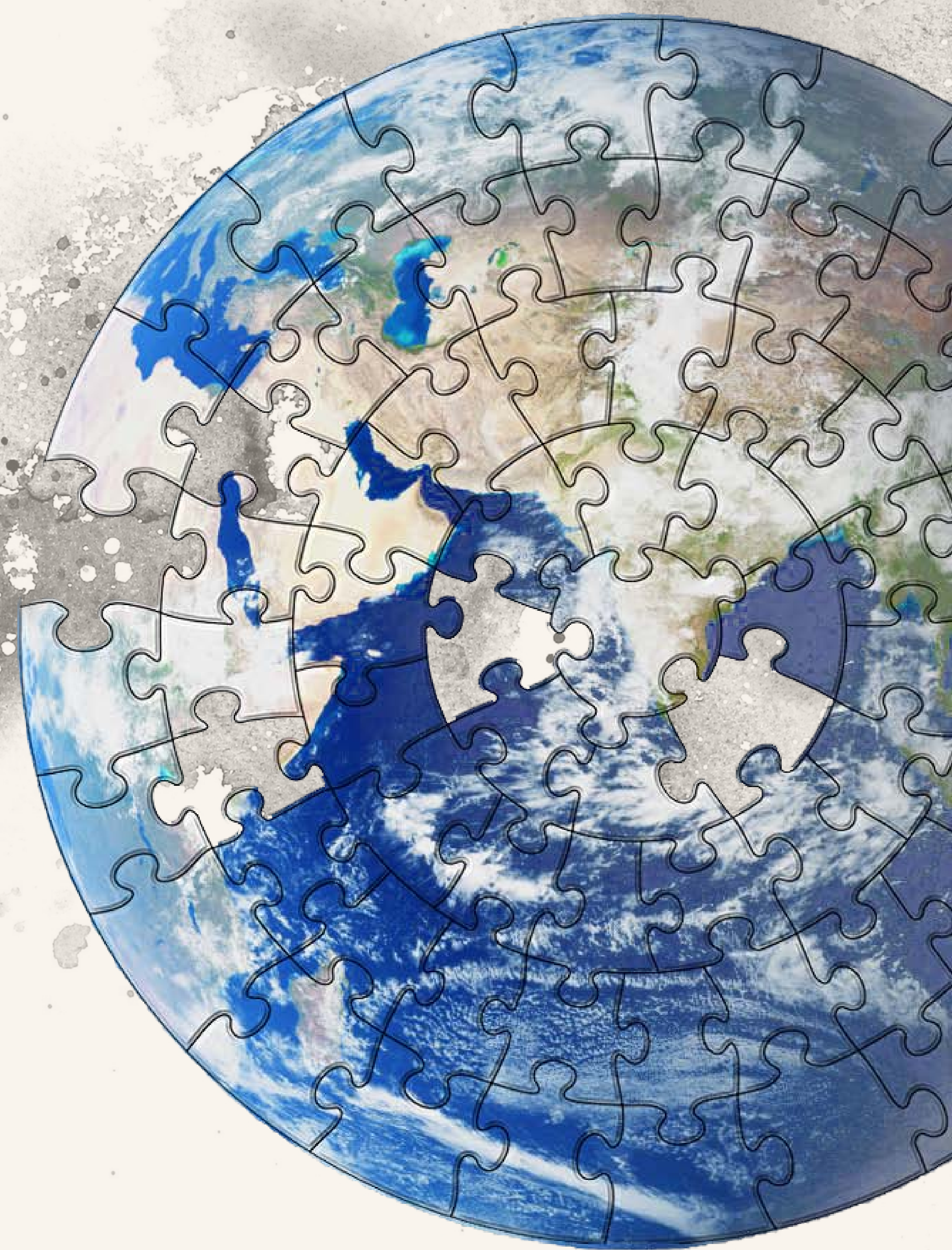
Let there be distance?

Mandvi Kulshreshtha

One thing that we have learned a great deal about during the lockdown is 'distancing.' There was a set intention with which distancing was floated in the public discourse, and that intention has been accepted, questioned, challenged.

In the post-pandemic new normal, I would like myself and the world around me to delve more on the notion of distancing, coming from values of social justice, equality, and empathy. The eight distancing commandments would be:

- 1. Social distancing from prejudices and judgment:** Although there is a sense of being non-judgmental and open-minded, there are continuous background conversations that colour our perception.
- 2. Social distancing from elements promoting hatred and animosity against certain groups in society:** Especially during the pandemic, with heightened concerns about hygiene and sanitation, religious practices, etc., certain groups are targeted more than others.
- 3. Physical distancing from negative energies, negative people,** and not letting their anxieties and insecurities overpower universal values.
- 4. Physical distancing from burdening earth from our ill-deeds, such as contributing to pollution, environmental degradation:** Will continue to take up earth-friendly practices.



Whether it is about the planet, society, relationships, or people, our values have the magic of putting it back together again

5. **Emotional distancing from fear and anxiety that pulls down humanity and makes us commit atrocious actions** (though fear in some circumstances is encouraging).
6. **Emotional distancing from the feeling that “it is beyond repair”**: Whether it is about the planet, society, relationships, or people, our values have the magic of putting it back together again.
7. **Cognitive distancing from the idea that I have learned it all**: I also need to unlearn a hell-lot of things. Reboot and restart in some aspects.
8. **Cognitive distancing from the idea that I am communicating my values and thoughts effectively**: I will continue to sharpen my communication skills through expression, language, and other means until I can actualise my values.



Gulan: Mandvi, I found your insights about social distancing that we practice very interesting. In this country, the social distancing we have practiced for thousands of years is the caste system. How do you think a social change in this space can be made and is there a way we can take people along without polarising, to create an equal society?

Mandvi: The thing is that I was getting a bit annoyed with the word ‘social distancing’ that too at a time when what we actually needed was less distance; physically, yes, but not socially. We did not need to alienate people who are working for us or working with us. We needed to actually embrace them, embrace their insecurities, and be there for them in that moment. And what we did was exactly the opposite.

The system that we have created is around us. Not only just caste-based social distancing but also gender-based, profession-based, class-based and even age-based. When we see all this in unison, we realise what we have done is distanced ourselves based on a lot of things.

I think the crisis provided that opportunity. Also, the scale at which the realisation has happened is phenomenal. It is not just limited to one community or one group of people. There is a national level or a global level realisation, which I think is important. For views, discourses, or narratives to be picked up - we need that kind of scale.

An important aspect related to urban planning or city planning—representing another form of distancing—is spatial distancing. We build our cities in a way where we box people, build walls, and ensure that people from different strata would never interact with each other. The philosophy itself is that people should not mingle with each other, so they are kept separate and kept apart.

Efforts are being made to make cities inclusive, to have a free flow of classes and castes and create public spaces that are accessible to all in an equitable manner. This is one way to reduce social distancing.

Sanjukta: Discourse-building is crucial. Everyone in a rainbow coalition will not have similar reasons for getting together, but the idea is to get allies together. Get them together to get the discourse stronger and for transformation to happen.



LABOUR, CASTE, INEQUALITY

“
In the **household**, some people tend to become selfish because others become over-generous. I think that selfishness is a natural outcome of over-generosity. Over-generosity has to be stopped; only then will people realise that they cannot take you for granted. Not letting somebody take you for granted has to come from the person who is being taken for granted.
”

”

”



My kitchen window

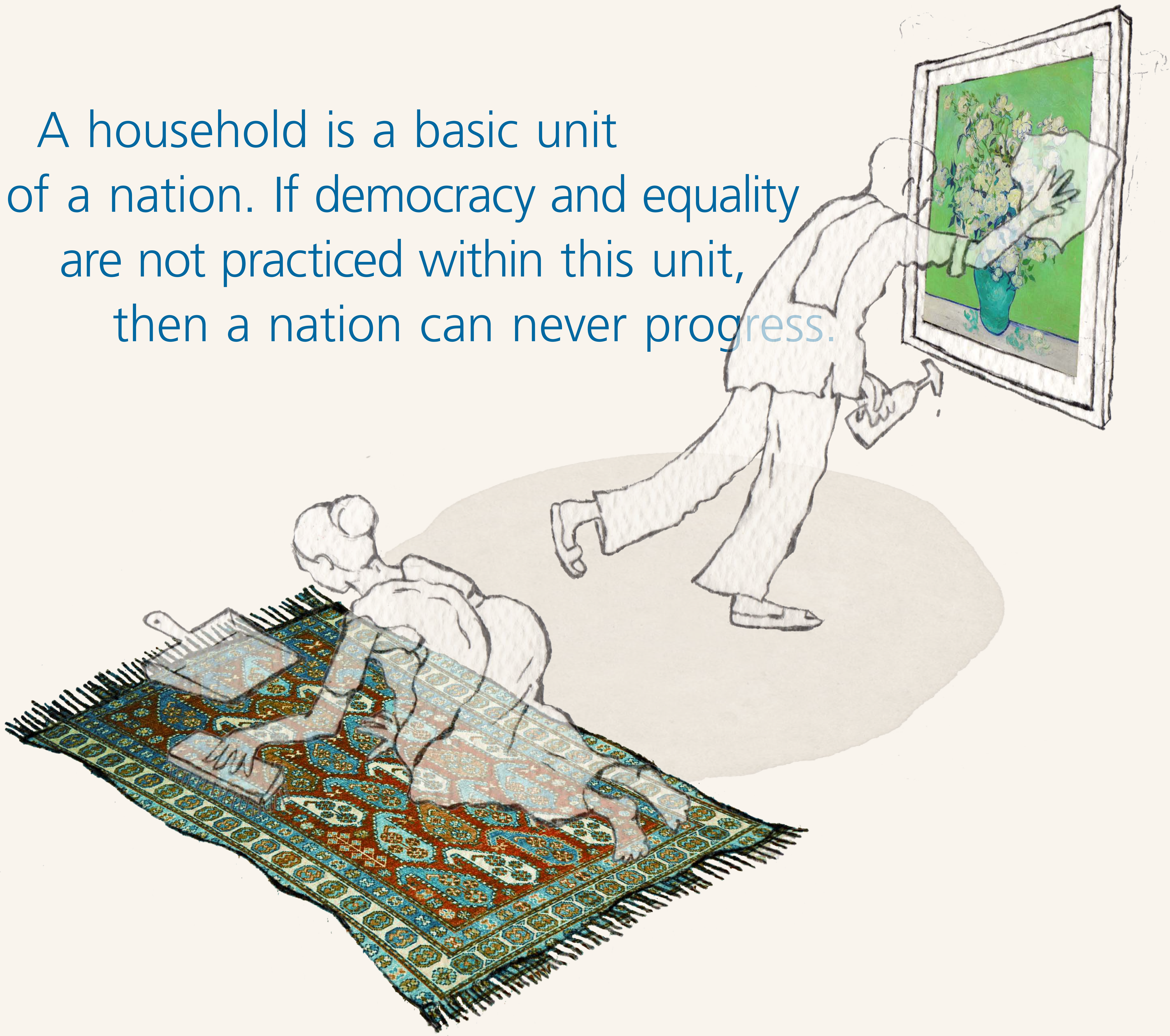
Aditi Kundu

In the beginning, it was unimaginable that the pandemic was going to last for several months. This period of great distress and agony has revealed hidden truths that were sometimes consciously, and most of the time unconsciously ignored earlier. Here I would like to share my limited perspectives during the lockdown through four distinct personal experiences as observed through my metaphorical “kitchen window.”

Within our homes

- 1. Our relationship with domestic workers** – The sudden disappearance of domestic workers during the lockdown made many of us realise their significance and our dependence on them. The volume of work they do for us is enormous and the compensation we pay in return is meagre. More often than not, an absence of any sense of gratitude and not extending even basic courtesies to domestic workers is normalised in our culture. Even in nuclear families, needing the services of a domestic worker is usually considered indispensable. I find this dependence bothersome. And I will tell you why. During the lockdown, I realised the foolishness in the set-up of my house. I allocated work to all the members of my family, “five manpower” to clean one house, and after having cleaned and dusted every corner for two consecutive days, I realised the futility of it all. I realised that the reason I am able to sustain my job and am able to run the house is primarily because of the domestic workers.

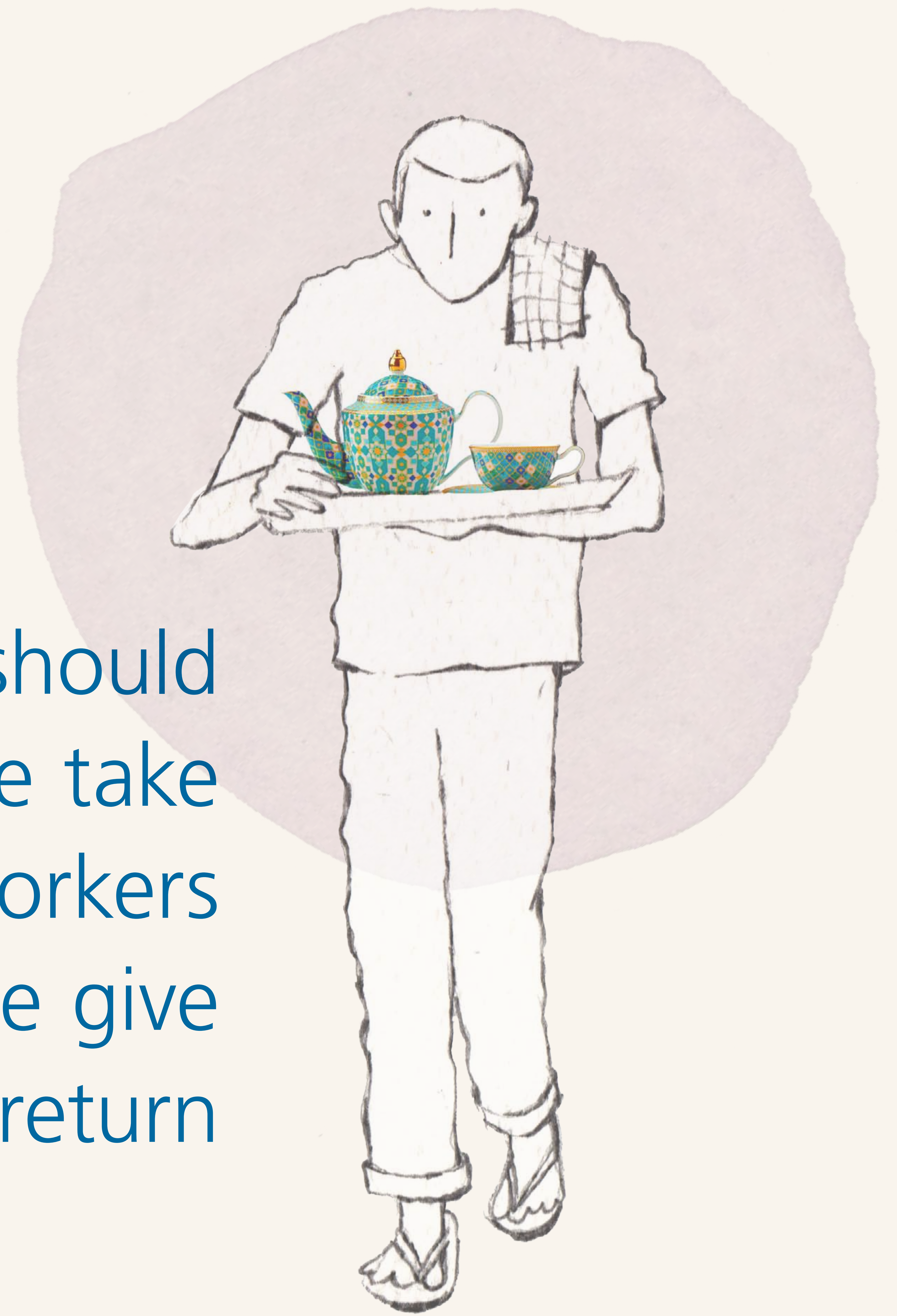
A household is a basic unit of a nation. If democracy and equality are not practiced within this unit, then a nation can never progress.



We have complicated our lives so much that it is impossible for us to be independent. We have too much stuff on display, to show where all we went, what all we did, reflecting our fine sense of art. All this is possible because there is this huge section of the society that keeps their houses simple, who do not have any fancy decoratives except a few pictures. It is because their sense of art has systematically been replaced by our sense of greed.

I also realised that domestic work should not be categorised as unskilled labour. A higher pay is an important way to bring dignity to the work that domestic workers do. You may say that with higher pay, many domestic workers would lose their jobs in the process; what about them? I say that this argument was put forward to those advocating for abolition of slavery. If people were freed from bonded labour, then I am sure this section of labourers will find something dignified and better to do with their lives. The new normal will bring dignity to labour, not just in economic terms but also in spirit.

The new normal should
question what we take
from the migrant workers
and what we give
in return



2. Gender inequality within the family - Domestic workers are like pivots on which most urban households run. Once this balancing force was taken away, it invariably became a woman's job to support the household system from collapsing. From cooking meals, washing clothes, cleaning dishes, the modern Indian woman is more than capable of taking care of the house and her finances as well. Essentially, the domestic worker is employed not for the woman but for the rest of the family. Invariably, in most households, women took on far more than their share of workload; and felt crushed under this weight. It has made many women question the system and its total disregard for equity.

The new normal must address these inequalities. A household is a basic unit of a nation. If democracy and equality is not practiced within this unit, then a nation can never progress. It is absolutely imperative that gender equality becomes a norm...not a favour towards women, but the only fair alternative.

In society at large

3. Our migrant workers - After the lockdown was announced, hundreds and thousands of migrant workers decided to leave the city for their native villages. Despite hurried measures - to help the poor of the city with provisions of food and shelter, the migrants chose to leave. The question is, why did they do so? Why did they choose to walk hundreds of kilometres with mountains of stuff on their heads and children by their side? Why did they leave the

'comforts' of the city and go back to their villages taking on an arduous journey? The answer to this is, because their lives have always been this hard. Extreme physical labour, uncertainties and lack of basic comforts have been part of their lives. Our sudden waking up to the pain of the migrant workers walking home and the outpour of public compassion hides an everyday hypocrisy. The privileged city dwellers have always turned a blind eye to the plight of the porter, rickshaw puller, labourer, hand cart puller, the ironsmith, *dhabawalla*, factory workers, who work tirelessly in merciless weather. This crisis has brought to the forefront the drastic lives of the poor. The lockdown did not make the lives of the poor migrants miserable; it only made it visible.

The new normal should question what we take from the migrant workers and what we give in return — poor wages, precarious working conditions, unhygienic living spaces, inequality in provision of basic amenities and most importantly, not providing equal opportunities to their children. Such disparities, when bridged, will bring collective joy to our society.

4. When we promote hate - Hate often sells better than love and it is sold in many packages. We humans are often selfish and ignore tragedies that do not hurt us but create a hue and cry only when a personal loss occurs. We then look for someone to blame.

Not just in India, but the pandemic has triggered many forms of hatred globally. Communities or minorities were being targeted, based on fake news or contorted stories. Globally, we saw a rise in Sinophobia. It is true that the world is suffering tremendously due to the virus and that the pandemic began in China, but the pain has been universal.



The new normal should recognise that hate and injustice meted outcomes in different packages. It must also allow different social groups to express their ideas and debate freely on controversial topics. The pandemic has shown that as human beings, we may discriminate against one another, but the virus does not.



Aditi: A household, I feel, is a basic unit. It is like a cell. If the basic atom of the element goes wrong, then the element is going to change. Or if the cell structure of an organism goes wrong, the DNA goes wrong. A household is like that. If there is no equality, no democracy in a household, if women are not given an equal place, children are not heard, men dominate—if this continues, then the country is going to be what it is right now. For a better world, the change has to start from the basic unit. We cannot have a happy and generous country if households function like this.

Ashish: There is gender discrimination in society – there are no two ways about it. My wife and I have consciously talked about this, made sure our kids get this message, and talking to our kids has been a conscious choice.

Anurag: In India, people are open to doing a job as long as they are not seen to be doing it in their community, where it is perceived to be beneath their ‘caste ascribed’ levels of dignity. If you are a *pundit*, then you cannot drive a rickshaw in your native place, but you will do so in a large city. You can find a job in your native place, but because you are from an upper caste, you will not take it up. This is the sort of migration which we are overlooking.



Caste migration is very high. Ever since I have started living in Delhi, I've seen that the domestic workers working in my society are economically weak, but belong to upper caste, and they migrated just so that they could work in a household. They cannot do similar work in their village or their city because they belong to the upper caste.

The three months' lockdown has taught me that when we live in an inclusive situation, where people are there to talk, to listen, we feel more optimistic and closer to people. It is about building a society, where we can have less inequality in terms of caste, money, disabilities. I have been working with the trade unions, building small market communities, women's communities. These three months have taught us to walk together, embrace the new normal, embrace the uncertainty, stick together, listen together, and have time for people who matter in our life.

I believe it is time for building a new community, the time to create a new society, where the only 'ism' is humanism.

Within me, around me

Anurag Shanker

I feel our opinions have changed in the post pandemic world.
Our needs may now be more important than our wants.
The changes that I want to see in this New Normal:

Within me

- Focusing on reading, writing, learning by myself
- Being mindful of when I am being
 - more cautious and more distrustful
 - more sensitive and generous
- Have less stuff and a simpler home; go simpler and economical
- Appreciate freedom and not take anything for granted
- Live in the now, be grateful and take risks
- Be a bit more organised, content and self-reliant
- Support local producers, shops and businesses
- Build better relationships; eat, pray and love
- Acknowledge to myself that my values are my identity
- Remind myself that office work does not have to rule my life;
I can make changes and make things work for myself
- Ask more questions and demand answers from the establishment and myself

Live in the now
be grateful
and take
risks...

...Ask more questions and
demand answers from
the establishment
and myself



Around me:

- I would like to see an acceptance that we are in this together.
- There is power in community: people should get more and more connected.
- Love and compassion among people, especially for those who are less privileged.
- People should learn how not to waste food.
- People should learn more about climate change, global warming and the importance of the environment.
- People should improve their understanding of global issues.
- Humanity, above all! People should increase their sense of appreciation for everything we have as a global community. We are stronger when we act together.
- Recognise that being with others is the key to happiness.
- People should start seeing life through the eyes of animals.

FOOD

I’ve become more **mindful**
of the relationship between food
on our table, our health and
our planet’s health...

...rethought our entire **consumption** cycle,
whether it is to do with what we eat or buy,
what we wear, or where it comes from.



**I tried to look at things
that I could do at a personal level.
I also pushed myself...**

Sabina: We were bombarded with a lot of information, whether it was on TV or WhatsApp. A lot of it was negative and dark and disturbing. I tried to zone it out, and I looked more inwards; I tried to look at things that I could do at a personal level. I also pushed myself, thinking that this is a good time to do things that I did not get time for earlier and also do things that I was hesitant about, being in my comfort zone, and not wanting to push the boundaries.

I have been passionate about food—growing, cooking, or feeding—and I also felt that food connects people. A good meal can be a big mood up-lifter. Everyone was going through their emotional turmoil—my immediate family, my help, the support staff—and I felt that I could do something around food. Now I am thinking about how to take this forward.

The new normal

Sabina Suri

The new normal, post the COVID-19 lockdown, includes the learning that I can be self-sufficient to a large extent, that I can get on with minimal complaints, honoring the present, and that my happiness is internal – within me.

I'm proud that I have stayed (mostly) calm, stayed busy creatively both with my university teaching as well as my up-cycling projects within the house, done things to engage myself in my passion (cooking), learned new bread baking skills, and stayed healthy – mentally, physically and spiritually.

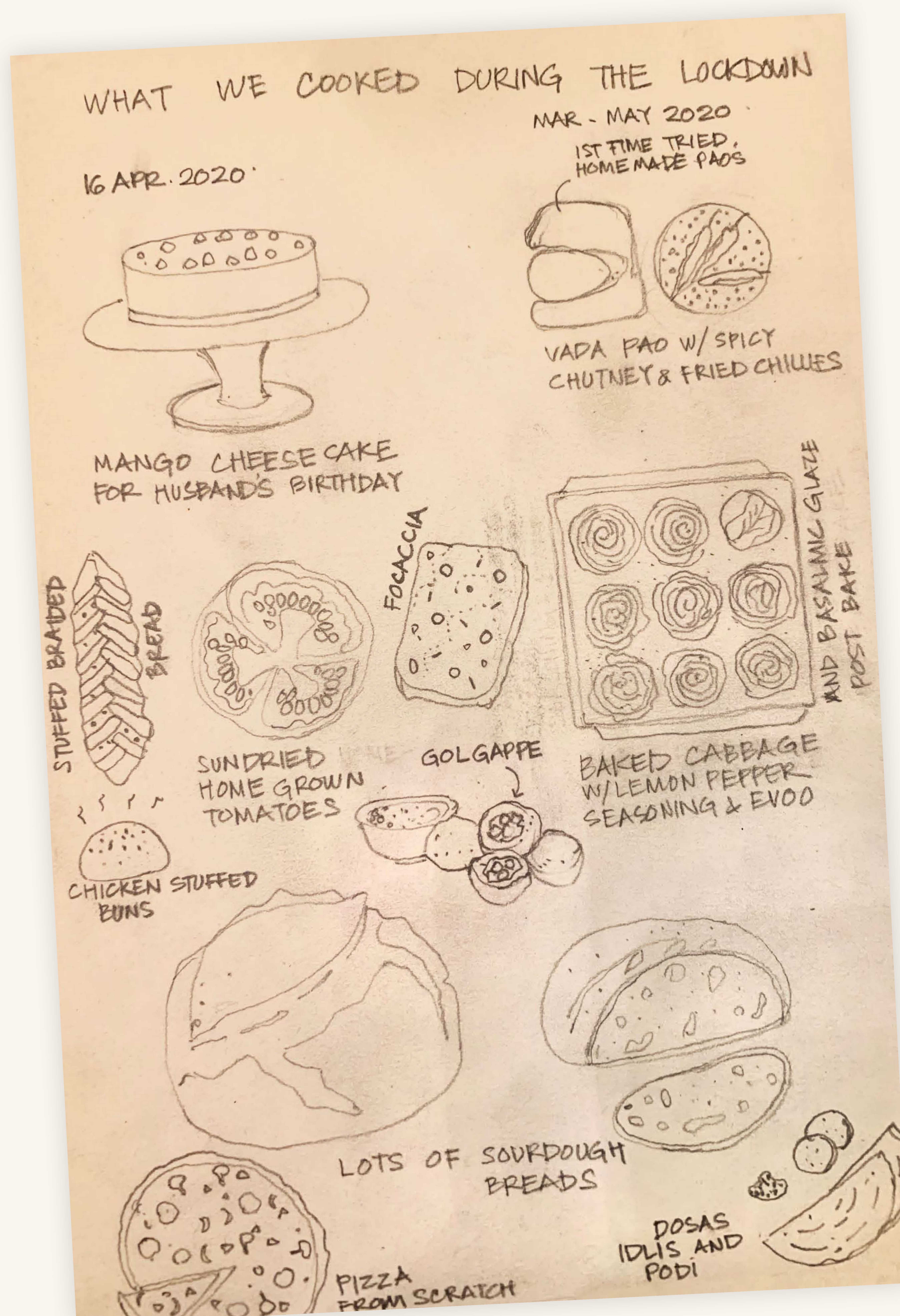
I have been understanding, sympathetic, patient, and kinder with myself, my partner (who has been going through his work and personal challenges through the lockdown), my children, our help, and support staff.

Through the entire lockdown, I have been regularly connecting with people via phone calls, messages, video calls, reaching out to my folks, extended family, friends, and parents of friends who live outside of India to check on their well-being and find out if they needed any support or help. I have made more time to listen to childhood stories, and tune in to someone's interests and feelings a little more. I have begun to cherish these conversations and connections with people for whom I did not have time earlier.

I have been open about sharing my knowledge, learning, and my passion for food with others to grow together. I am grateful to have become part of a local baker's forum where we share/exchange food recipes, tips, and our knowledge around food, sourcing local ingredients, etc. I am inherently a shy person. This was a significant change that I made consciously, to move away from my comfort zone and engage with people I have never met before/connected with virtually. Our regular Facebook live cook and learn sessions have been rewarding, inspiring, and something that I have eagerly looked forward to every week throughout the entire lockdown.

I have used the lockdown to cook up a storm, literally! I have made sure my family and help have stayed happy, well-fed, eaten healthy, fresh, and tasty food, free from preservatives and additives, and have not missed going out for meals to restaurants and not missed ordering in. I have definitely become more mindful of the relationship between food on our table, our health and our planet's health.

PS. Since food played a big part in keeping my sanity during the lockdown journey, here are some sketches depicting the same.



I have rethought or relooked at our entire consumption cycle, whether it is to do with what we eat or buy, what we wear, or where it comes from (on a regular basis as well as in moments of temptation). I am making an effort to not just grow my food to the extent possible by composting our organic waste, but also to source a considerable chunk of our food from local/organic producers and local independent businesses. The lockdown has been an eye-opener that I have enough; I do not need much more than the basics if I am contented in my mind.

In general, I am thankful for the pause, reset, re-awakening, time with my family, and time for myself and my interests that this lockdown has provided. I feel it has been a year for change – for working on myself and for lowering my footprint on this planet. I am content and thankful for what I have. I hope to continue with this positivity and calmness within, in my engagement with others, as the new normal.



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**...those who appreciate diverse food
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Sabina: I made a conscious effort to share my passion for food with people, and I have received overwhelming feedback from people who have tried out some of my recipes.

Aditi: I have also felt that food is something that brings a lot of joy. Also, I think those who appreciate diverse food have a broader perspective about people, too. Food does help you to connect with people.

Neera: The sheer number of people distributing cooked and uncooked food during this lockdown was something really amazing. That is the first thing that started happening as soon as the lockdown began.

DEMOCRACY

“ I am a parent, and I am going to run with my most vulnerable kid. I feel that a **country** is like a **family**, and the **government** is like **parents**. ”

“ Democracy has become this farce, where it is about once you go and **vote**, your job is **done**. ”



Aditi: Let's think of a hypothetical situation: I have got five kids—one with a broken leg, one just six months old, one 17 years old—and all of us are having a good time at the beach. Suddenly there is a tsunami. What do I do? I am obviously going to pick up the child with the broken leg and the infant and run. I am not going to pick up my 17-year-old, thinking that this kid, when he grows up, will earn and provide for me, so let me save the most able-bodied child. I am not going to do that. I am a parent, and I am going to run with my most vulnerable kid. I feel that a country is like a family, and the government is like parents. Parents care for the vulnerable.

Ashish: Democracy has become this farce where it is about once you go and vote, your job is done. You know, we can sit here and blame the political class, but I think that the fundamental tenet of democracy has crashed. We cannot blame politicians; their job is to win elections, get a post and stay elected, so they have milked the system. And they are doing an excellent job of making us feel that our job is related to that single moment of going to the booth. I think democratisation is an ongoing process; otherwise, it does not work as a system.

We are a fear-oriented species

Ashish Mehta

Three things are becoming clear during the COVID-19-induced lockdown:

1. **The value-basis of human existence has taken a beating** – this has happened over the past decades or centuries, depends on individual perspectives.
2. **At an individual level, most humans do not have a self-purpose** – a drive, a *raison d'être*. Instead, most of us have adopted 'othering' that has been manifesting in the garb of what is dubbed as 'we are social beings.'
3. **We are a fear-oriented species. We can act, and that too, at scale.** We can respond quickly, in a decidedly different manner, and with hardship. But all of it in the realm of fear. Fear delivered top-down.

My new normal will encapsulate:

Behavioral change (at Individual level)

- True recognition of the dignity of labour – an appreciation of all work and workers.

Focus on the many and not the few ...the breakdown is an opportunity for a breakthrough



- Thoughtful and responsible consumption.
- Self-reflection and a conscious effort to move away from the “no time to stand and stare” mode (from the poem *Leisure* by William Davies).

Government and related eco-systems will

- Strengthen democratisation: equate individuals always, not only for votes and during elections.
- Veer left on the government’s role and responsibilities: Focus on the many and not the few. If this means, bigger government, so be it.
- Be honest and transparent.
- Not be afraid to call citizens to arms – they can and will respond.
- Build local resilience.
- Strive to be bold – the breakdown is an opportunity for a breakthrough. For example, invest, big time in fundamental research.

Global / As-a-species

- Start taking the environment, ecology, and biodiversity, seriously!
- Thought leadership and new emergent systems on:
 - a) re-classification of work
 - b) re-distribution of wealth and the economic tenets of globalisation
 - c) globalisation transforms (into some avatar of the SDGs)

Personal (for me)

- Connect more, and more often, with loved ones and those with a shared history. I need to put less emphasis on meeting in-person and that too physically.
- Listen more, interact at a personal level, with everyone I come in contact with.
- Go deeper into areas of Renewable Energy, Impact Finance, Social Development and Systems Change – towards realising a more equitable “new normal.”
- Hone my household skills, and regularly use them, not only for once-in-a-lifetime situations!
- Reconcile the conflict on financial sufficiency. While this time has shown the need for personal net worth, it also clearly demonstrates the privileges I do have.



BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

“Many people of my age are...
connecting with rural realities,
self-work, environmental
and social betterment...”



**I think I am getting
more and more courage
to challenge every convention
and live the way that I feel is right.**

Gulan: Kavya speaks for a different generation altogether. She and Tanisha are the youngest members of our group. Kavya, one of the things that you have said is you would like to see young people take leadership for ‘planetary healing and systemic transformation.’ This is the dream we all share. What role do you see for yourself as a young leader? What systems need to be put in place for you to really get a movement of young people going?

Kavya: The kind of work that I do or the kind of things that I am trying to learn is majorly unconventional within my family circle or my friends’ circle. I would say that even I started on a conventional note when I got out of school and did my graduation.

It is over the last nine years that I have met people who have inspired and influenced me. I think one of the significant challenges that our system faces today is that everybody aspires for the standard of life that they see their parents have. It is what everyone desires, and it is limited. It only focuses on your economic status, what kind of a house you have, what kind of a car you have, and so on. I think that is a big challenge. Many people of my age are trying to scratch that surface or make a dent in their own ways: connecting with rural realities, self-work, environmental and social betterment.



I see that a lot of young people are going in that direction, but it is still not glamorous, not fancy. What has inspired my understanding and how I see myself doing it is by talking about it proudly, learning what has worked from other people that I interact with, and sharing it with my friends. It may or may not inspire them. But I have been able to inspire a few people just by talking to them about one or two good practices. It could be something as simple as composting at home or using a menstrual cup instead of plastic sanitary pads. These are small things, but when I start such conversations, people listen.

With myself, I think I am getting more and more courage to challenge every convention and live the way that I feel is right. There are a lot of other people who have created really good lives for themselves by living differently, not having a big house or a big car, and they have been happy doing the work that they want to do. So, I am not afraid of challenging conventions anymore.

I dream of a new normal

Kavya Arora

I dream of a new normal built around values of compassion, harmony, and care for the planet and its inhabitants. It will hopefully be about shunning the accumulation of wealth and privileges for the self, a time when people value equity and help those less privileged than themselves.

Our new normal will be woven around fair and conscious systems of leadership, governance, business, human and spiritual development, and global betterment. We will see young people take up leadership for planetary healing and systemic transformation.

A few specific corollaries from this new normal philosophy would be so:

- World leaders will stop exploiting natural systems for profits of large businesses, and indigenous knowledge and wisdom will be valuably mainstreamed.
- ‘Giving’ will be valued by individuals.
- Government schemes will move from capitalistic favours to ensure basic needs, fulfillment and decent living for the vulnerable.
- Forests will regenerate when people move away from the consumption mindset — no fast fashion, less consumption of electricity and water, no use of chemical-laden products, no commodification of nature, provision of clean air, water and food.



Our new normal will...
see young people
take up leadership
for planetary healing
and systemic
transformation.

- People will realise what matters for a good life – clean air, water, food, natural spaces, human connections, good work and life, mutual respect.
- Nature and its principles will be integrated into our daily (and all) life choices.
- People will have more time for vocation, relationships and their wellbeing.
- The pursuit of learning and being the best versions of ourselves will be predominant in our lives.

Here is a quote that inspires this dream:

*“The one who plants trees,
knowing that he will never sit
in their shade, has at least started
to understand the meaning of life.”*

- Rabindranath Tagore



Why are we always pushing the conventional down our children's throats? Guide them towards other, new possibilities.

Ashish: In India, we keep talking so much about 'pay respect to our elders.' At some level, we are imposing this on young people. It is so prevalent, this need to listen to somebody (who may be wrong), just because of their grey hair. I think we need to stop doing that, period.

The generation that we see today, between 15-16 years and 25-30 years, can take more courageous decisions. One system change that I would make is to get outside the mindset that we call our cultural heritage, respecting people because they are old. If you deserve respect, you will get it; that is just the reality of human behaviour.

Sabina: I also feel that our generation has a set idea about success; we superimpose that on our children as well. We try to impose those pressures and conventions on them. I have two teenage boys at home, and sometimes I see myself and my husband doing this. Like in terms of what (educational) streams they should pursue, what they should do in life. Sometimes we do this unconsciously. During this lockdown, I really tried to understand their perspectives and respect them for the choices that they are making. I may not agree with them all the time, but I am learning to respect that they are thinking individuals, and one should just let them be.

Gulan: I would go a step further and say not just let them be, but even guide them towards the unconventional. Why are we always pushing the conventional down our children's throats? Guide them towards other, new possibilities.

Tanisha: It is the old tradition that we have in society about what we want girls to do. So, I made up my mind during this lockdown that I have a big challenge. We have endless possibilities of living, but we are not thinking about things that make us happy. I want to make myself strong; I have this challenge.

Challenging old truths

Tanisha Tiwari

The changes I wish to make

Within me

- Give more time to things that matter to me:
 - Myself
 - The Planet
 - Family, close ones and friends
- Start new routines to be a better person and move one step ahead for inner power:
 - Write daily experiences
 - Meditate
 - Say yes to new ideas
 - Challenge old “truths”
 - Promote others
 - Meet like-minded people
 - Work on a planet profile and make it accessible to others

new routines...
write daily...
yes to new ideas...
promote others...
like-minded people...
make it accessible...



Around me

- People value important aspects of life, through survival habits to maintain a basic living standard.
- People stop worrying about what neighbours will think or being curious about neighbours' actions with no reflection about their own actions.
- Brainstorm about creating opportunities for people coming back to villages to work on basics and start something on their own.
- People coming closer to their family and friends.
- People will focus more on what is required for living peacefully.
- Acknowledge the risks of young minds succumbing to internet addiction.



Pinaki: This willingness, of young people to go beyond the set patterns, is I think, still limited to a very elite or urban setting. In rural areas, people who are close to nature are not getting the mentorship and are moving away from nature, towards the city, or towards an aspiration, which is more urban. I think that is also one area to work upon—to inspire youth from rural India to think out of the box, to appreciate what they have, and to build on that. It would be immensely powerful.

Swati: Knowing that there are people out there who find resonance in what you have to say, keeps one motivated to stay on the path. Tanisha, I can understand the kind of struggle that someone like you, might have to face because you are living in an environment where pressures of conforming to societal norms are tremendous. They are just overpowering, and it is an entirely different kind of struggle. It is easy for someone who has the freedom to live the way they live, and I am sure that to a large extent, you do too. But still, you have to face people who might not be very accepting of what you are doing on a regular basis. So yes, that takes a lot of courage.

Anjan: What I find interesting is that in this COVID-19 situation, girls have responded in a completely different way. There are many positive elements that are emanating from this generation and they have started questioning. The way they are discussing this is so encouraging. People who work with me are coming back and saying that they want to do something positive now with their skills. How can we expand this and not wait for the systems to support them?

**S U C C E S S ,
P R O S P E R I T Y ,
G R O W T H**

**“ I think a lot of us
have realised that it
does not take a lot
for one to be fulfilled... ”**

Something quite simple

Swati Negi

The pandemic has been instrumental in bringing a lot of repressed angst about the society we live in, to the surface. Many of the problems which are now glaring at us have existed for decades. But most of us have been too busy keeping the mechanism running to be able to notice them. Society is like a giant painting that we all participate in creating. Suddenly we have an opportunity to stop and observe what we have created, and it is a reality check!

I am sure that every individual at some point or the other has questioned or been dissatisfied with the world we live in today. But the pandemic has given us a pause, which has made us reassess not just society but our relation and contribution to it.

Spending time alone at home is not the dream that is being sold to us. Media romanticises the idea of solitude through pictures of beautiful people sitting on a mountain top or meditating by a gorgeous river or people cozily tucked into their blankets and sipping coffee. In reality, a lot of the time goes into sweeping, cleaning, washing, cooking, maintaining and repairing our huge collection of items that we were convinced we need!

The pause has also made us look at our homes, the design of our lives, our relationship with the immediate, what and how we consume and discard and at our reliance on external assistance. That brings to forefront the question of social distancing.

What we are experiencing right now is not normal by a long shot.

Society is like a giant painting that we all participate in creating. Suddenly we have an opportunity to stop and observe what we have created, and it is a reality check.



Social distancing is a short-term strategy to handle the crisis. It is the only solution at hand but temporary. How long can we avoid social contact?

Humans are social beings. We depend on each other for comfort, support, and survival. The problem is our population. There are too many of us concentrated in small areas extracting resources from everywhere to satisfy our insatiable desires.

I believe the new normal will be reminiscent of the past when communities were tightly knit together with a manageable number of people who know each other's patterns. The most resilient communities in the future will be the self-sufficient ones, with minimum dependency on any external resource.

In action, I imagine this new normal to be:

- Grow your food!
- Harvest water.

- Exchange resources, so the entire community thrives.
- Think beyond human; this includes animals, plants, air, soil. Care for it all.
- Reimagine education.
- Reimagine health care.

What I am suggesting is an oversimplification of a complex problem. One may ask in response, “What about cultural exchange and exploration and diversification?” Maybe the internet will help answer a lot of these questions.

I feel step one to mending the world is to eradicate our dependency on the invisible hand that fulfills our desires. Our subconscious is constantly bombarded with imagery and ideas of what will make us happy. Once we learn how to survive on our own, we can imagine how to entertain ourselves further.

The new normal would be something quite simple and basic, something as simple as learning how to walk, share, accept, love and coexist.

Swati: COVID-19 has been a wake-up call for all of us. I have been thinking about ways in which I can reduce my dependency on the ‘invisible hand’ that I had mentioned. The invisible hand and invisible desires that we are told are going to make us happy. A lot of these desires do not come naturally to us, but they have been marketed and shown as something extremely fulfilling. If one were to delve a little deeper, we would realise that there is so much one requires to thrive as an individual and as a community. The basic, quintessential elements—food, the air, soil, and the elementary stuff—are what we actually require. Beyond that, slightly more complex, is our connection with the society—our neighbours, the animals, the insects in our fields, microbes, etc.

I think a lot of us have realised that it does not take a lot for one to be fulfilled. I think as an individual, this has been my quest. As a community, if everybody could take this stance, then automatically, I see the communities redesigning themselves to live in a very simple manner. There are five of us who work together. We have started cycling to the office and have reduced our dependency on fossil fuel.

...there are a lot of complicated systems out there, but one does not need to depend on them.

We have all started participating hands-on in our construction sites, so that has also made us a lot more connected with whatever we are talking about and designing on paper. We have started realising it on our own. That also builds a lot of confidence and makes us see that there are a lot of complicated systems out there, but one does not need to depend on them. I feel that the moment we talk about ignoring our degree of interaction with the outside world, we are talking about realising what it is that we have access to, and making the best use of it, and limiting our requirements to be able to sustain ourselves with whatever is available around us.

Gulan: Listening to young people is wonderful because it is a different way of looking at a world that has been pre-packaged and given to us. From childhood, we are brainwashed into a kind of consumerist lifestyle, and to see that shift, that change, that self-examination that you are going through, the choices you are making in your life, is a huge inspiration.

Tanisha: Our grandparents' generation priorities were mostly food and safety; for our parents, it was safety and career. We have got it all—safety, food, career—and now we are looking for meaning in our lives. We are moving a step ahead of them. There was always a question in my mind about why our parents do not think the way we think. I realised that we should not have so many expectations from them because, what they got, they got quite late, while what we got, we got quite early, so we are one step ahead.



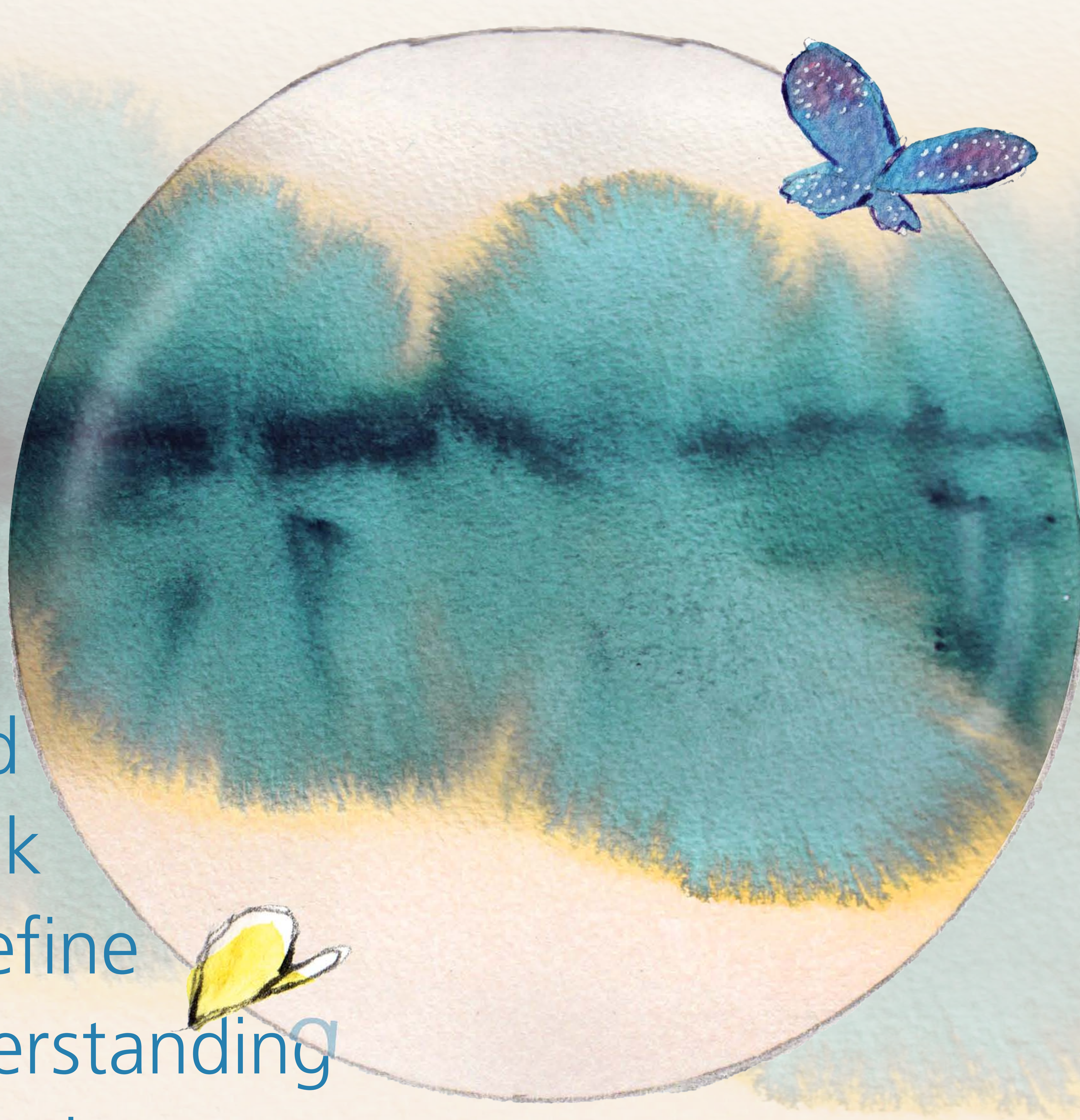
There cannot be infinite growth on a planet with finite resources

Sanjukta Mukherjee

As we begin to realign ourselves after the sudden and unprecedented casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic and look to the horizon for what is to come, we can look both ways. On the one hand, there is a dismal panorama that lies in front of us—the vista is almost dystopian. On the other hand, we see governments, policy makers, organisations, civil society, and humanity at large are met with an opportunity to learn from the recent months and begin planning for an operational future that is more compassionate to human beings and more resilient in the face of all hazards.

It is clear that once the world begins to function out of doors once again, it cannot be in the way we have known it to be so far; there needs to be a total restructuring of the economic order. The forces at work to make this happen have existed for centuries, much before the present crisis, only to be mostly ignored and stifled. It is as if the earth itself, in its blind instinctive way, conspired with the sane human wisdom to bring about this change. Mindless consumption will have to stop being the engine for global growth. Technological innovation must add value to increasing human knowledge, productivity, equitable distribution of wealth and not be a barrier to inclusiveness which, it seems to be today in so many instances.

Human prosperity indeed requires resource use. Yet, overuse of resources has already led to the breaching of planetary boundaries. There cannot be infinite growth on a planet with finite resources. The present conditions of unsustainability will increasingly dis-balance the carefully designed world.



We need
to rethink
and redefine
our understanding
of prosperity.

We have seen during this time how a minuscule proportion of humanity feels comfortable while millions around them die miserable deaths. Yet resource use is beyond any doubt linked to development. According to Carina Millstone, “the bottom 30 per cent of countries with the lowest score on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) all consume less than 10 tonnes of materials per capita.” The HDI was created to emphasise that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone. Yet when we say we want to lift people out of poverty, how can we do so without increasing their material prosperity? Creating any wealth is dependent on material resource use, which depletes the planet beyond any succour and has brought us dangerously close to annihilation. The present crisis has established, beyond any doubt, the realisation that we cannot rely on mindless economic growth for long-term development and prosperity. This expectation is a vicious cycle which we need to break. Business, as usual, has used this one principle for all this time, and we can see the results in front of us.

The new normal I envisage for our planet - whether it is in the Global North or South where conditions vastly differ - is a transformative journey from an economy in “ecological overshoot” to one that operates within its host planetary environment. The overcrowded Global South, with its increasing negative impacts on planetary resources to support the basic demands of its growing masses competing with the over-consuming socio-economic patterns of the prosperous lifestyle of the Global North. We need to rethink and redefine our understanding of prosperity.

A lot of the technology innovations are responsible for a “high-resource-consuming” and “high-greenhouse-gas-emitting” lifestyle for countries and people who can afford it. Our understanding that these material comforts are representative of “an affluent economy equates to true development” is a notion that has to change.

This is totally at odds with the present mainstream political and business discourse focused exclusively on growth and the avoidance of recession and stagnation. The increasing levels of global injustice practiced within and between countries will need to be reversed to achieve this. The world leaders can no longer turn their backs to the need of the moment.

The present pandemic has shattered the faith in the old process of achieving development, highlighting the horror that the most vulnerable of our population had to endure, showing the inadequacies of the growth focused economy. The more the vulnerability, the more disproportionately they suffer the consequences of the present way of doing things and their impacts on climate change. There needs to be a planned and fair allocation of planetary resources for all the citizens of the globe. This requires a different understanding of resource allocation use and calculations of how to reach and maintain sustainable level of emissions congruent with our planet’s capacity for regeneration. Innovation and disruption should all be geared towards this milestone.

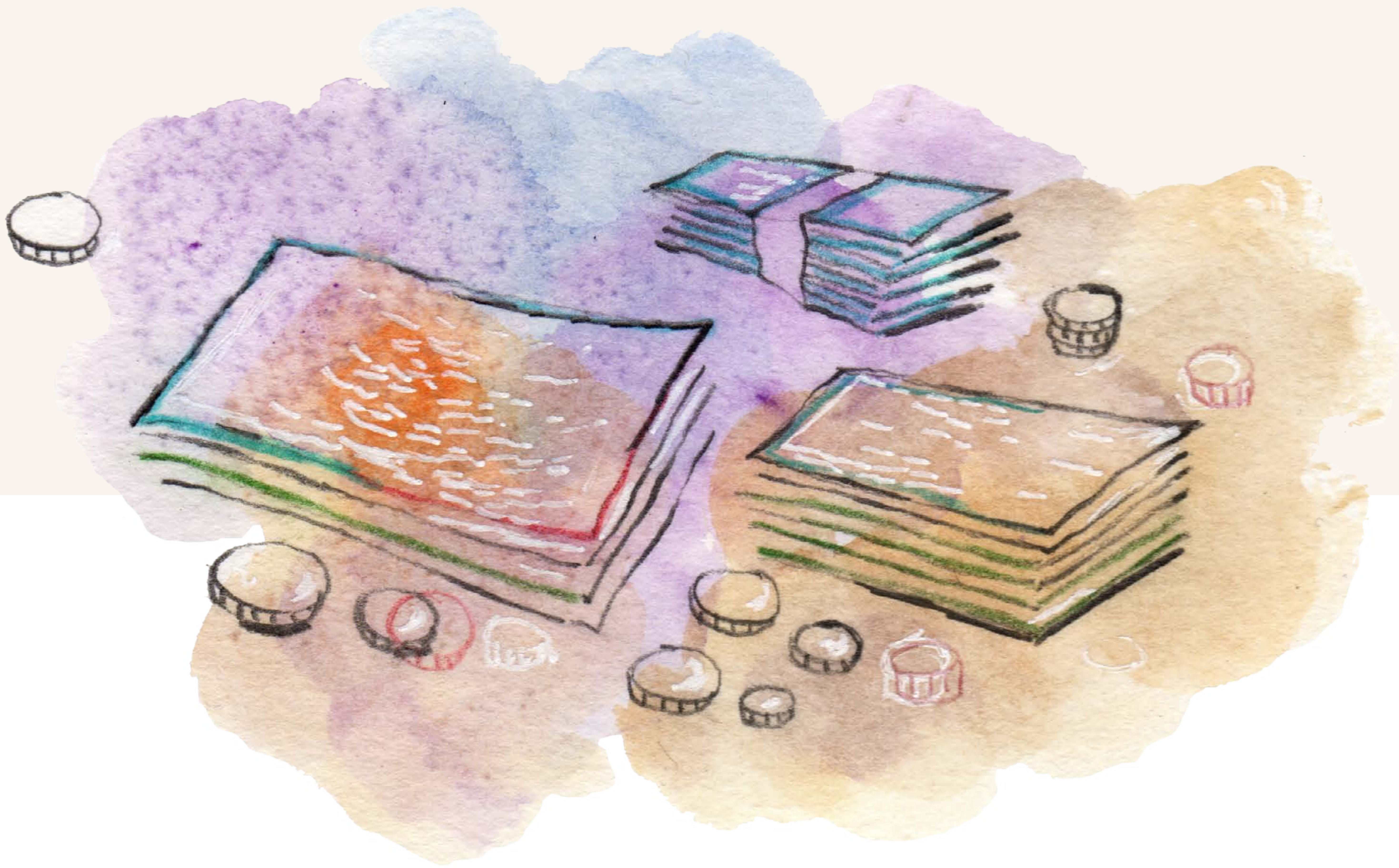
focusing on equal emissions per capita
...will lead towards our goal of establishing
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linked inseparably.



The concept of “contraction and convergence” underlies the whole process. It has been developed by the Global Commons Institute to promote the notion of sustainability not just focused on reducing the impacts of climate change through a reduction of emissions but also of calculating and focusing on equal emissions per capita.

This notion will lead towards our goal of establishing social justice and environmental sustainability at the same time because they are linked inseparably. One cannot be operational without the other.

I stand for the universal values of social justice, harmony, love, inclusiveness, and wisdom for myself and others. In my work with marginalised women on their journey towards sustainability, I look for a small epicentre, not isolated but connected to a world focused on these values, led by the sane human intelligence that is our most dominant feature, and not by the greedy monstrosities that seem to rule the planet today.



Gulan: Sanjukta, you have said that we have to rethink and redefine our understanding of prosperity. For most people in the world—privileged or not—prosperity is defined by material goods; how do we change this concept?

Sanjukta: There is a conundrum here. We are saying that with limited resources, there cannot be unlimited growth. There must be a way out, and I am using these two terms: contraction and convergence. Contraction is, limit the use of resources and by this, I mean environmental resources. Everything that we use comes from nature, and it is converted by technology, so limit that. Convergence is the way that we are tracking our needs to change. Thankfully, a lot of work is happening all over the world, and that brings a lot of hope. The working mechanisms, the indicators need to change.

Pinaki: I have found so many people whose dreams are also manifestations of my dreams. I think for us to see the interconnectedness, it is important to get out of the mindset of scarcity and embrace abundance and a sense of sufficiency. Deciding on what is sufficient for you as a person strengthens the commitment to be in the journey.

The lure of the status quo

Satrajit Sanyal

COVID-19 began suddenly, without allowing thought. Initially, there was a willing suspension of belief, and then, indeed, disbelief. The physical location enabled me to see a lot of people not entirely complying with the safety norms, which included the deniers and disbelievers, people who thought it was enough to walk at a distance while continuing to share breathing space without the need for gloves or face-masks.

While not a germaphobe, the effect on me being in a so-called containment zone full of deniers (resulting in the spread of infections) was a coldly terrorising experience. One may have never purchased a bottle of hand-sanitizer even once before. However, out of love and compassion for other human lives, taking necessary precautions should not have been even optional, but a necessity. It is clear that not enough people fully understand how the novel coronavirus works even today. From what can be observed, it still seems like there are a lot of people who assume that we are looking at a six/twelve-month scenario before things go back to “normal.” However, it may be fair to think that we are in this for the long haul. We have to adapt to living with a deadly, very contagious virus in the coming years.

Mathew Taylor, CEO of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, in an essay has stated, “The transition period may last some time and it is important to start exploring the principles that could and should govern it. Emergency powers and measures are not right for an extended period. Democracy, transparency, devolution, protecting health and protecting the most vulnerable should be some of our priority principles for transition.”

Malorie Blackman, celebrated author of the *Noughts and Crosses* series in her essay on the new normal in perspectives speaks of rediscovering interconnectedness; of rediscovering neighbourhoods and neighbours; of all humanity thinking and rethinking what values, ethical standpoints and the future stands for - shifting the 'status quo' away from individualism in the 'old normal' (that was not working for everyone), to that of shared prosperity and common responsibility.

So, why discuss "Status Quo?" What, indeed, is the "Status Quo," and how is it relevant to the present discourse?

To understand change (which, whether we like it or not, this virus has brought into the broader human perspective), we need to appreciate that one of the biggest obstacles that can stand in our way is the lure of the status quo. The status quo is the existing state of affairs in a system that is not resilient to disruption. In human terms, it can be so appealing that people will go to great lengths to convince themselves (and others) that maintaining it is best for all involved. The biggest lure is that it is a familiar, comfortably predictable state and mindscape, where easy steps can be taken to control the outcome. Since most human beings revel in the sense of control, they unconsciously settle for feeling "in control" rather than, in reality, being "in control." There is also the enticement that it creates a sense of safety, and since human beings are biologically hard-wired to seek safe places, a need to hold on to that feeling of security is one of the reasons the status quo is maintained.

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revel in the sense of control,
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...the entire human race rallied
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The problem in the post-COVID19 scenarios in this light is horrifying if one were to think, visualise and articulate what it would mean to return to that elusive and contrapuntal “safe space” without understanding the long term ramifications of such a course of thought and action.

- Firstly, return would mean discarding the mind-space where “preparedness” is the new world order.
- The race for vaccines, which has brought the world together will regress into the pure lure for capital—the loss in human values and ethics will be incalculable.
- The thought-space would regress to peddling pedantic articles and papers in seminars—away from what may have been a unifying act of worldwide pacifism.
- Lastly, the entire human race rallied around for a period of time...came closer to true *ubuntu* than in any crisis in the last century. This could be a new era of human hope, of human development, of human unity.

So, the lure of capital can be—with a lot of disgust—but the lure of status quo – never! We cannot physically, economically, socially return to the status quo.

Gulan: Satrajit, in your submission, you speak about the sense of safety in maintaining the status quo, which is why we do not want to change it. We are all beneficiaries of this system, of this status quo. How do we embrace a complete change in our mindset and everything familiar to us? How and what do we need to give up, and are we willing to do that?

Satrajit: The sense of safety that I have spoken about is something human beings are hard-wired towards. My observation over this period of three months is that a lot of uncomfortable scenarios keep popping up where you can see the problems in the system. The status quo is something that will always come in. If you are trying to move away from business as usual or even a new system, after a point of time, it will become the status quo.

So, I think we require to look at our values, where we stand and enumerate from our value space where we wish to be. A lot of things that I commit to are powerful intentions. When I have to take that into action, it takes a lot more because my system might not be resilient to that kind of change. I think we require to look at what we can change in our systems and how we can connect it to the higher system in a simple way. I think if we can marry the value to the action and take it forward; that could be the change.

When we have connected it to a different system, this will keep on giving us feedback. There is a feedback loop that has been set up. I will be moving from a process or a place of being where I am, which is business as usual, to a state of responsibility because there are the other systems where I have made that commitment, and that feedback would be affecting others. So, if I am standing strong in my values, I will not be in a position to say that I will no longer continue with this even if it is difficult.



**How and what do we need
to give up, and are we
willing to do that?**

BEING THE CHANGE



Neera's illustration depicts the tree of life, a storyteller and an attentive listener. The tree of life represents the strong story-telling tradition of passing down ancient wisdom through generations. Our stories have to be told and heard to be kept alive and for us to thrive.

कैसा होगा (How will it be)

Neera Kathuria

कैसा होगा कल का सूरज

कैसी होगी कल की धूप

(How will tomorrow turn out to be, I wonder.)

सड़कों पर छाएंगे सन्नाटे

या बाजारों पर भीड़ पड़ेगी टूट

शहर रहेंगे यूँ ही खामोश

या मचेगी फिर से शोर-ओ-गुल की लूट

(Will the streets be bustling or abandoned;
will the cities be lifeless or the same as before?)

आज हैं हम सब सहमे डरे

अनजाने अंधेरे से होशियार

पर भूलने में नहीं लगता वक्त हमें

कल के लिए क्या हम हैं तैयार?

(We are scared today. We are unsure of this darkness.
But it does not take us long to forget. Are we ready to face tomorrow?)

रुककर सोचने का ये एक लम्हा है

कुदरत ने हमें थक हार कर टोका है

कहाँ जाएँ यहाँ से, कौन सी सड़क लें?

साँस लें एक गहरी, बैठें थोड़ी देर, खुद को खुद ने ही आज रोका है

(Now is the time to think of the way forward that nature is showing us.
It is only we who are in our way.)

वापस चले न जाना उसी राह पर

रुक न जाना उन्हीं सवालों में

मौका मिला है ज़िन्दगी को फिर तौलने का

फँस ना जाना उन्हीं मकड़ी के जालों में

(Now is the time to speculate, introspect. Please do not go back
to the same road, the same web of destruction)

ये बातें मैं खुद से किया करती हूँ
कल कैसा होगा, कभी-कभी दिन के ख्याबों में जिया करती हूँ
तुम्हारी सोच मेरी ज़िम्मेवारी नहीं
पर अपने आप से कुछ वादे ज़रूर किया करती हूँ

(I daydream of tomorrow. I am not responsible
for what you think but I do promise myself.)

बहुत ज़रूरी है, ज़रूरी क्या है ये जानना
फ़र्क ज़रूरत और चाहत का पहचानना
ज़िन्दा रहने को क्या है अहम
और क्या है ग़ैर अहम उसे मानना

(It is crucial to know what is essential for survival.
We need to understand the difference between 'need' and 'want'.)

ज़रूरत है अपनी बुनियाद फिर ढूँढने की
ज़रूरत है अपनी जड़ों को पहचानने की
कुदरत की मज़ी क्या है आज
ज़रूरत है रुक कर, थमकर, उसकी ख्वाहिश को जानने की

(It is important now to understand what nature wants.
It is time we went back to our roots.)

आज जो वक्त हम पर गुज़रा है
उसे कोई और देखे नहीं
गलतियाँ जो हम से हुईं, मौके जो हम से छूटे
कल की नस्लें नतीजा उसका देखें नहीं

(It is important to understand so that the next generation
does not face today's consequences.)

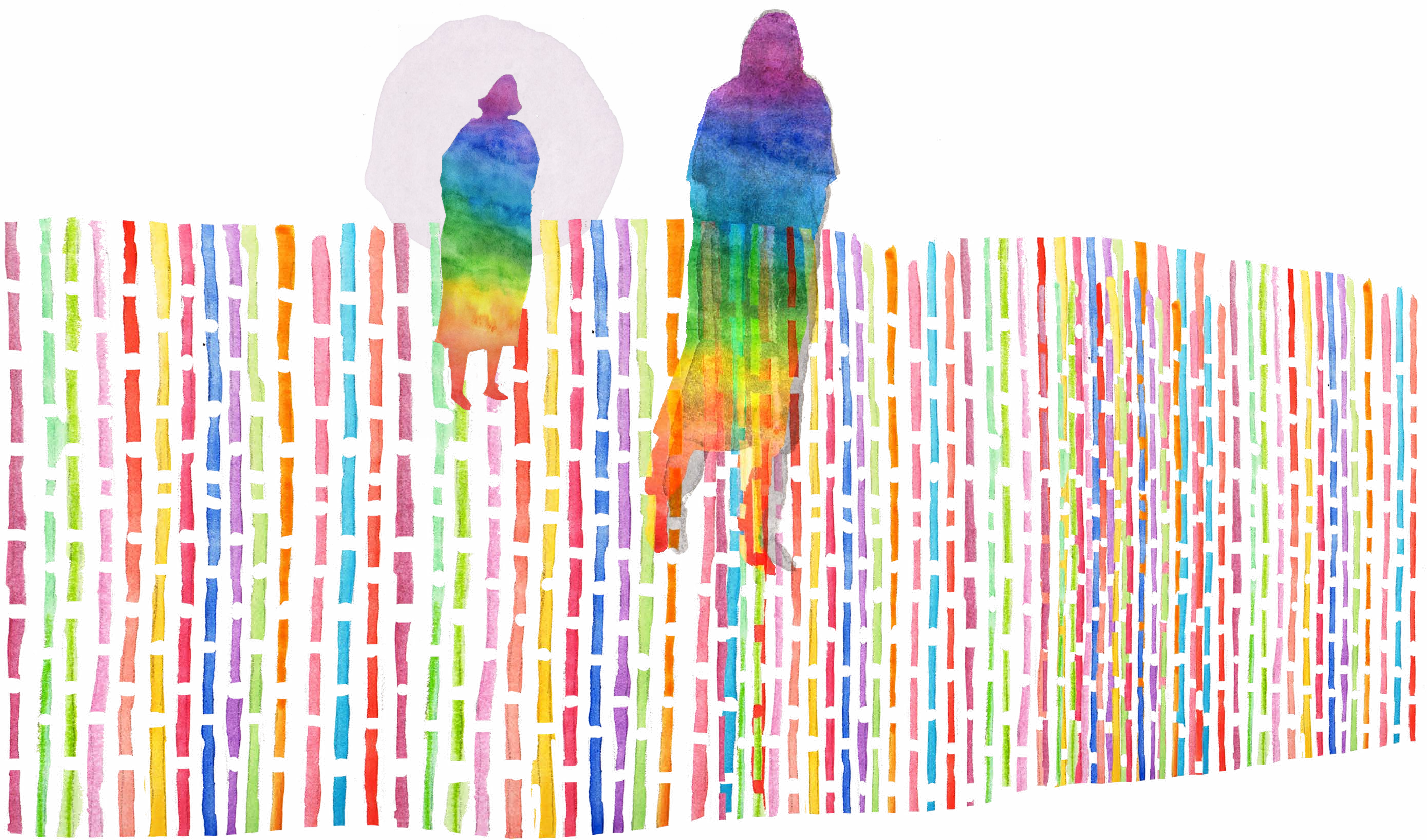
आज वादा ये मैंने खुद से है किया
मुस्तकबिल का ये ख्वाब यूँ ही बदल दिया है
नहीं जा सकती पुराने 'normal' पर मैं वापस
फैसला आज कर ही लिया है

(I have committed myself and decided
that I can not go back to the 'normal' that was.)

कैसा होगा...

कैसा होगा कल का सूरज
कैसी होगी कल की धूप

(How will tomorrow turn out to be, I wonder.)



Gulan: Neera, in your poem, you say, “*Nahi ja sakti purane normal me wapas, Fayesla aaj kar hi liya hai*” (I have decided that I cannot go back to the ‘normal’ that was). So, what is this *fayesla* (decision) for Neera?

Neera: While writing, I crossed this out many times. These lines show a commitment. This decision was connected to changing my habits. I thought of how I was living before. And I put in that *fayesla* word after a lot of thought. Before *fayesla* that line had implied something like *koshish*, meaning, I will try it. Then I said, why will I try? Why am I not able to say that I have decided? In the earlier paragraph, I say that I am not responsible for your actions, but I am making a promise to myself. I told myself that when I promise myself, then why cannot that promise become a decision? There is a phrase used – *koshish ka wayda* (promise). So *koshish*, *koshish ka wayda* and *fayesla* – these are three stages; in the first two, there are chances of not acting on them because we can give ourselves excuses, but *fayesla* is a stage when you set it in your mind that you have decided and now just do it.

Tanisha: When the lockdown happened, we were able to sell the local products of the farmers directly in the market, and we gave them a reasonable rate. Many migrants who came back during COVID-19 realised that farming is something that they can do again and earn from that as well. People have been telling us that they would continue this. Somehow the spark was generated. I have started planting trees. I involved local kids and told them why it is important, and I introduced incentives for them – recognising who is doing more and giving prizes, etc. It gave a basic sense of connecting with nature, eventually, the whole village was connecting with nature. I see myself encouraging others by being the change that I want to see—so that they can get inspired by our story and then incorporate it into their lives.

Gulan: The work I—we—do, is to bring about value-based, systemic change to create a society based on equality, equity, justice and dignity for all. The understanding that I must change in order to change what is ‘out there’; that I cannot create change unless I transform myself; the sense of *ubuntu*, the sense of standing in my values – for me, these are the essential things that can transform the way the world is now. It is possible if we live with integrity – if we walk the talk.



No wars, ever again

Gulan Kripalani

Within me

- Learn more, read more, practice more.
- Take more risks.
- Ask more questions—of myself and others.
- Speak up and speak out—standing in my values.
- Remember I am not the high priest of change—explore new ideas, multiple answers.
- Develop more tolerance and compassion for those I disagree with.

Around me

- People understand that we are all interconnected, and think and act from the space of *ubuntu*.
- Let the words '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (The world is one family) come alive in action—for humans and the whole planet.
- No wars, ever again.
- Every country stops defense spending. And all the money goes into quality education, healthcare, environment.

- The notion of success and failure is redefined.
- The notion of development is redefined.
- People have a sense of sufficiency—from 'more' to 'better'.
- People stop taking action (or not taking action) from a space of fear.
- We all source our actions from universal values and transform the invisible systems that perpetuate the problems.
- Common spaces for prayers for all religions: *pujas* in churches, *namaaz* in temples, mass in mosques...or better still, all religious rituals to be done in privacy, at home. Nothing in public spaces.
- A new world language based on signing which everyone learns.
- Hugely incentivised marriages between people from different regions/ religions/colours/caste/class etc. So, a new generation can embrace differences and diversity.
- Mandatory planting of appropriate trees and plants to celebrate every birth and death.

Pinaki: There are so many of us who want a better world, but what stops us is that individual efforts are not enough because what we are encountering is so complex. An inability to be in synergistic action, where our efforts are like a relay race – come in the way. We are conditioned...

**We are conditioned to show the outside world
what we know, and that makes us vulnerable.
We need to be comfortable with not knowing
and exploring more.**

A thriving and harmonious planet

Pinaki Roy

Within me, I would like to be more mindful of my impatience and anger, more aware when I am acting from my fears and be able to break free from the patterns that hold me back. I would like to do more and “work” less and unleash my creativity.

Around me, the new normal would be a world where the basics of life are assured for everyone; where people can see the interconnected systems that are holding us back as a species; where we can transcend ‘isms’ to live in a thriving and harmonious planet based on respect, justice, and dignity for all life forms.

Ashish: We keep talking about making the change and how to get away from the status quo. Historically, it seems change happens either incrementally or through revolution. I am doing incremental change at some level so the impact will be gradual. But there is revolutionary change too. Black lives matter or #MeToo are a perfect example. A few months ago, in India, we saw people’s movement against amendments related to citizenship. I have always said that Mumbai as a city has no real city life; as such, it is more about going to work, come back. Everybody does that – yet so many people were out there. That is another example of revolution.

C O N C L U S I O N

Gulan: Everything that we have all written about is possible; it is possible in the new normal. Perhaps this e-book can be a beginning for all of us to think and act differently. A new way to look at the world and create a world where every living being thrives.



“ People say
that we have
hit the pause button
in the last few months.
I do not think so... because
with a pause button
when we restart,
we go back to what
we were listening
to before. But now,
I think, we need
**a new
song.**

”

List of abbreviations

3-D	Three Dimensional
ADDA	Almora Direct Dhavan Alliance
AutoCAD	Computer-Aided Design (CAD) software
CII	Confederation of Indian Industry
EMF	Electro Magnetic Field
HDI	Human Development Index
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
ICC	Indian Chamber of Commerce
LBSNAA	Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration
MLP	Multi Layered Packaging
NIFT	National Institute of Fashion Technology
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDRC	Sustainable Design Research Consortium
SECMOL	Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Glossary

Anganwadis – a type of rural childcare centre in India. It means “courtyard shelter” in Hindi and other Indian languages.

Chutney – a thick sweet sauce that is made from fruit or vegetables. A chutney is also made spicy or sour in many Indian households.

Chhola bhatura – a popular dish cooked in northern India. Chhola is chickpeas curry served with bhatura, fluffy deep-fried leavened bread.

Dhabawalla – local or migrant vendors who put up roadside food stalls.

Dosas, idli and podi – dosa is a south Indian pancake made from finely ground rice and lentils; idli is steamed cake made from a batter of ground rice and lentils; podi is a coarse spice powder.

Golgappe – a popular street food and Indian snack having small fried bread balls served with tamarind water.

Jugaad – a flexible approach to solve a problem, that uses limited resources in an innovative way.

Kashmiri kehwa – Kashmiri kehwa or Kashmiri kahwa is a special spices tea.

Laccha paratha w/ shahi paneer – a unique, layered, crispy flatbread served with cottage cheese curry.

Namaaz – the act of worship in Islam.

Paan shop – local vendors or shops selling leaves of the betel plant wrapped around tobacco, areca nut, etc. and chewed, especially because they have a pleasant taste and stimulant effects.

Pujas – the act of worship in Hindu religion.

Pundit – used for addressing upper caste brahmin; is also used for a priest who belongs to a particular clan, authorised to do idol worships in Hindu temples.

Raison d'être – the most important reason or purpose for someone or something's existence.

Roti – the flat round bread cooked on a griddle in almost every Indian household.

Thukpa – a Tibetan noodle soup.

Ubuntu – concept of common humanity, oneness.

Vada pao – a popular dish native to the state of Maharashtra. The dish consists of a deep-fried potato dumpling served with a bread bun, like that in a burger.

About the contributors

The **Forum for Responsible Building** is a collective of architects, designers, engineers, anthropologists, ecologists, urbanists, permaculturists etc. from across India committed to the act of building (used as a verb, like building a house or furniture or producing a fabric or new ecosystems) in ways that does the least harm to our planet, is sustainable, and embodies processes that are value-based and socially just. They are simultaneously engaged in working towards personal transformation that is a prerequisite for generating social transformation.

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THE NEW NORMAL

A collective of change-makers—called the Forum for Responsible Building—has been working on ideas for creating paradigm shifts in the field of sustainable development, a shift based on equity, justice, love and respect for this planet and all living things. At the core of this work is the understanding that social transformation is not possible without personal transformation...and that unjust systems that perpetuate the problems we see around us are human-made and can be changed by human action.

The pandemic has given us an opportunity to see ourselves and the world from a completely different perspective. The collective decided to explore what a transformed world would look like. What was possible – for the world within and around us? How could we be the change we want to see?

‘The New Normal – within me, around me’ is the result.

The first step towards a better future is imagining the possibility of it.

