

# FINE PRINT

## ARE THEY ONLY ONE CALL AWAY?

According to WHO, one person dies of suicide every 40 seconds somewhere in the world and nearly 17% are residents of India.

**Lahari K.V.** investigates suicide helplines that have popped up claiming to save the day

PHOTO CREDIT: LAHARI K.V.



17-year-old Anjali (name changed) picks up her phone in a state of utter helplessness and anguish and dials the first number that pops up on her screen when she Googles 'Suicide Helplines India'. The line rings for a few seconds and disconnects. After making sure it is a 24-hour helpline that she is calling, she calls a couple more times only to have her call unanswered. The same story continues with the next couple of helplines on the list. "This is not just my experience," says Anjali who has survived clinical depression and is a 1st year college student now. "I know people who have called these helplines in times of dire need and haven't gotten a response or gotten very unsatisfactory ones."

About 1.35 lakh people die from suicide each year in India, according to a report by WHO. National Crime Re-

CORDS Bureau revealed in 2015 that at least one student commits suicide per hour in India. With mental illnesses still being plagued by stigma and therapy not being accessible and affordable to everybody, suicide helplines have begun to pop up to make professional help accessible to a larger group of people. However, complaints have been emerging about the available helplines, calling them 'dysfunctional'.

Abhinav Jain, another suicide survivor, recalls his experience with a helpline that was on the very top of Google's list of Indian helplines. "The call was not being answered at first and then when it seemed like it had got connected, I could hear no response from the other side. When I tried a couple more times, it either said the line was not reachable or busy." He emailed the helpline about

this shortly after the incident, only to receive a reply the next day that said, "Sorry, we do sometimes receive a lot of calls and sometimes the line is so bad it's difficult to hear. Instead of blaming us, you should blame bad connection. We do care about you and are concerned. If you do not succeed in talking to us through the phone, maybe you should email us instead and we will respond in a day or two. Sorry about the bad connection but that is not in our hands." Sasmita Patro, co-ordinator of SAHAI, a popular suicide helpline based in Bangalore says it had been difficult for them to manage when they had initially started out 16 years ago with just 13 volunteers. According to her, shortage of trained counsellors who are willing to work at these places is a major problem for any such organisation. "We also lack funding. It becomes hard to keep the organisation running with a shortage of funds because it will mean that the volunteers have to spend money from their own pockets for needs such as transportation. It's not economical for them... We receive 10-15 calls a day on an average. Our helpline is not open 24/7, but we are trying to employ more volunteers and extend our services to Sundays as well," she says, talking about the plans to overcome the limitations their organisation faces.

Anjali adds, "We do not have enough functional helplines for a country of 1.3 billion people, let alone those open 24/7. It's shocking that someone who has taken up the responsibility of saving lives seems so nonchalant and unbothered about the consequences of their irresponsible behaviour. This needs to be fixed."

## Is this seat taken? (More than reservations)

In a nation that touts unity in diversity, what does it mean to be a minority? **Grace Prince** explores the Naga identity in Manipur and Nagaland

"I just didn't have that one rupee coin." *Clink.* He kicked the small bit of gravel clean across the sidewalk, aiming for the lamp post. "No, it was so funny, you know? The way she asked me... and the fare was so odd, ya." We walked down a dimly lit Kamaraj Road with the rush hour in full swing on our right. As he found new pieces of broken-off pavement to shuffle between his feet, he continued, "It was like, 56 or 57 rupees from Majestic Metro Station till MG Road. And she was asking in such a serious way, 'Where are you from?' And I said, 'Manipur.'" MK Kashung, at 16 years old, had come to Bangalore in October last year to pursue a professional career in football. The low lighting did nothing to impede his accuracy. *Clink.* "Then, she told me to give my own country's currency," he paused to scoff, "I said, 'Manipur is in India, you dumbass...'" I asked him if he actually said that. "No, ya. But you know it happened again today..."

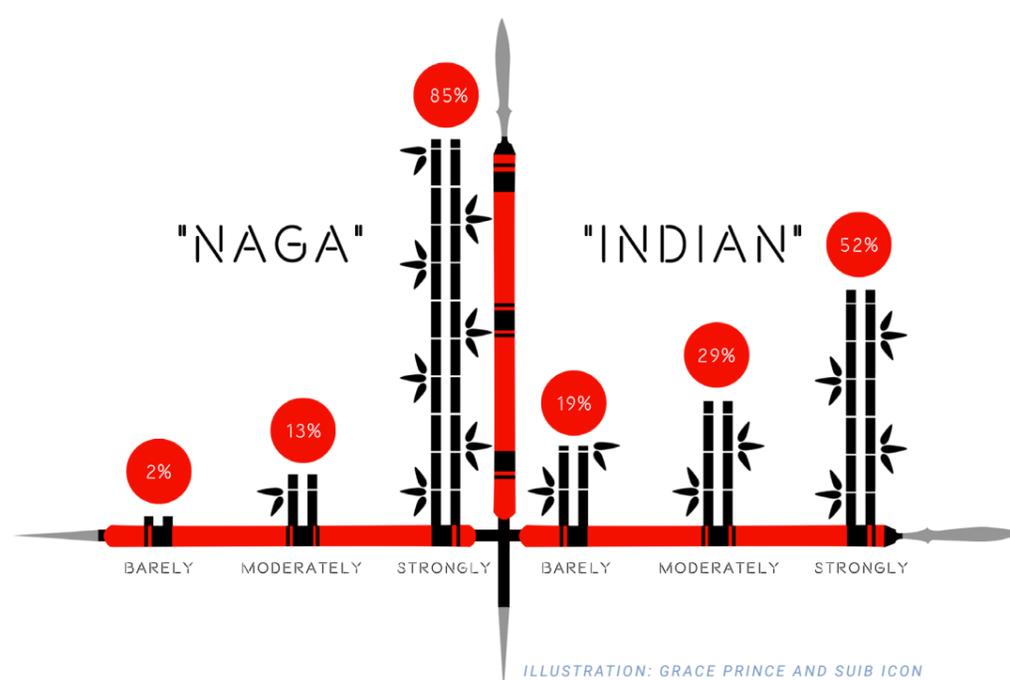
Nagaland did not exist until its people were acquainted with British bureaucra-

cy. The main forms of interaction among the tribes were through head-hunting and war; these hills were fraught with bloody clashes within clans, villages, and tribes. This changed with the formation of the Naga National Council and its charge towards an independent Nagaland under A.Z. Phizo. For the first time, people were introduced to a collective banner they could identify with and this political participation awoke in them a sense of unity that did not exist before.

Eventually, the Naga Movement saw a decline as it travelled underground, yet sparks continue to flare in the North-East; in today's brutal and violent political clashes are echoes of a bloodthirsty head-hunter's war cry. Zimick (name changed), now in his 70s, recalled his experience as a young boy with the Naga Underground. "They said that Nagas from every clan, from the Kashungs, Keishings, et cetera, should nominate one member of their family who was educated to go with them to China..."

(Contd. on page 12)

100 NAGAS WERE ASKED:  
HOW STRONGLY DO YOU IDENTIFY AS



# DIANA THOLOOR

## Belief in passion and faith in prayers



Diana, with the children after a show

**Jessica Anu Deepak** talks to the woman who has been putting up shows with specially-abled children

On 24th February 1965, in a small town in Burma, amidst the interracial war and rampant casualties, a 10 year old and her mother migrated to India, seeking safety, not knowing where the boat that took her father during the war was headed. Fast forward to many years and endless obstacles later – with hair cut short, thick black rimmed glasses, and a radiant smile – Diana Tholoor, 64, is a force to be reckoned with.

At the young age of 18, Diana chose a path which would have her battle the demons of this world at a larger level than most. “I had a choice of going to college straight out of school, but in order to pay for the fees my family would have had to work extra, so I took a decision to set out to educate myself by taking up a training that would help me to acquire a job,”

she says. “That stint as a teacher and the subsequent recommendation letter from the principal of the school that said ‘You should be a teacher’ is the one thing I remembered. I tried working as a typist for a bit and finally ended up training to become a professional secretary. I broke all records in the course and the institution offered me a job to teach. Since then, I have enjoyed teaching, building educational institutions, doing training programmes at corporates, running communication and presentation skills workshops, and finally starting my project: The Chrysalis Performance Arts Centre for the Challenged 20 years ago,” says Diana. She feels this was the point at which God put a purpose in her life. She became unstoppable as she went on to direct an outstanding number of over 200 stage productions, social films, ra-

dio shows, art programmes, and a programme for over 1,50,000 children in 20 cities all across India.

Diana is a person who thinks beyond the physical aspects of human beings and lives to prove people wrong. She explains, “Sarbani [the founder of Bubbles Organisation] is a friend of mine and asked me to consult for the school, and theatre became a part of the curriculum. I started working with children who were differently challenged – physically challenged, blind, deaf, [suffering from] HIV/AIDS, and the economically challenged in 1999. I have done over 150 productions, audio scripts, and socio-documentaries with the children from all sectors of challenges.”

This is what sets Diana apart from all the other directors and theatre artists out there. She directed *The Lion King* and *The Little Elf* with spastics and children on wheelchairs. Putting up a play with children with autism is an enormously difficult task, but she saw this as a means to shed light on how wrong we were in thinking so. “Yes, I am driven to enable the children to become professional performers so that they can shrug off any label that has been put on them. Doctors and medical professionals find it difficult to believe that children who are sensitive to darkness, loud sounds, strong lights, live smoke, and other issues can be silent backstage, make entrances and exits with such perfection, remember and execute every move with such confidence, never forget their lines, and remain calm and still while on stage, amongst all the others concerns people have.” In all her years as a director the most satisfying part of her job is seeing the joy on other people’s faces. “Parents cried watching their children perform like professional actors – with no behaviour issues, taking

their lines with such confidence, singing, dancing, and acting. When parents come up to me and say that they did not know their children could perform like this, I thank God for using me as his vessel to bring hope to them.”

As a corporate trainer, theatre person, film maker and dancer, Diana says, “Watching a production come alive, the feeling of something as linear as writing a script becomes multi-dimensional on stage.” This is a feeling she will always hold close. She has achieved many firsts, being the first to do a play with and for people with mental disorders like Schizophrenia, Manic Depression, and Bipolar Disorder. She was the first to train and stage a play exclusively with blind students and an all-deaf stage cast, and also the first to produce and present large-scale stage productions such as *Lion King* and *Aladdin* with autistic children. This ultimately led her to win a series of awards like the Sadguru National Award for Women in Social Work, the Kalasha Woman Achiever Award for Social Work, and the Shristhi Special Academy Social Excellence Award.

For Diana, however, this is just the beginning. In a room full of people, she will be the first to be heard and acknowledged because she loves to speak her mind. However, the one thing that most people don’t know about her is that she also loves silence. “For all my eloquence when I am teaching or speaking on stage, I sit quietly when I enter into a new environment. I like silence and thinking on my own, making my observations before I enter into any conversation with new people.”

Life will never be dull for Diana; she never allows it to be. She continues to travel, while taking on yet another production for the Bubbles Centre for Autism.

# Strength of a Woman

**Sharanya Mohan** meets an army nurse who has taken up multiple roles with ease

The quaint little villa gave off an old world charm that was quite alluring. While entering, I noticed the well-kept garden which provided a certain sense of discipline. The majority of the flowers in the garden were various kinds of roses. The long, British styled windows could be seen from a mile away; they added to the beauty of the villa – a blend of both new and ancient styles. I could see that she was busy – mending broken branches and picking up dry, withered leaves. As soon as she noticed me, she jumped to greet me. “Please feel at home here,” Vanathi Jones said.

As I entered, I couldn’t help but feel at home. I could smell the sandalwood incense burning. I saw an enormous family photo hung on the wall. After catching me stare at it for some time, Vanathi remarked, “You know, family is everything.” Every little corner in the house looked like she managed it with the greatest care and importance. I noticed how she had kept everything ready for me – cookies, a glass of water, a carton of Frooti, and a pen. She had the most infectious smile. Dressed modestly in a chudidhar-kurta, she wore a thick gold chain with a sil-

ver watch on one hand and two thin gold bangles on the other. Her long, silky hair could make her the subject of everyone’s envy. She had a healthy figure and looked a lot younger than her years.

I noticed a scar on her hand. “Being in the army for so long and that too in the medical field, you forget all about wounds and scars. This particular one was given to me during a very difficult period in Nepal. I had been serving there for about 3 years and one day, our truck was hit by a small bomb and we crashed. It was a small crash and everyone survived, but we were wounded.”

“I served in the United Kingdom, Nepal, Muscat, and India. Each country offered so many opportunities and helped my growth. I speak 7 languages and Arabic is one of them,” she revealed. Flashbacks of her toughest times tell how painful it was to stay without her son. “Duty calls, but how does a mother ever adjust to stay without her child? The thought of him having to stay back when I was shipped off to different countries just broke me. But, I survived and, thankfully, could be by his side in his most crucial years.”

Vanathi has received an Honorary Doctorate for Social Services and the Florence Nightingale Award for Excellence in the medical field. While giving a soft chuckle which turned her cheeks rosy she said, “Accolades maybe a pride for my family, but they don’t define me... Realisation of hard work and keeping my head afloat where everyone is drowning came to me very early on. I was 11 years old when my father had passed away in an accident and being the elder one in a family that had no man, I started working by the age of 15 to provide extra money to help my mom and provide for my sisters. I’ve lived the ‘nothing-comes-easy’ life which I wouldn’t say had much turbulence but rather had many lessons to

learn,” she continued.

Her family consumes all her time; she wishes to catch up on all the time that she missed spending with them. Her work in medicine still remains her passion and she now wants to open an institution for underprivileged students to learn nursing. “I don’t want anyone with a chance to have a bright future, skip out on something beautiful just because they can’t afford it or are not aware enough to receive it. My life started out rough but it has been the most exciting journey one could have.”

Vanathi Jones – a nurse, an army veteran, a mother, and a wife – is full of life and waiting to take on more roles.



Vanathi Jones: a nurse, an army veteran, a mother, a wife.

# THE STUDENTS' OUTPOST

*Rashika N. Makam writes about a student group that seeks to discuss and tackle various concerns faced by college students across the city*

The Students' Outpost (TSO) is a collective of students from Bangalore that seeks to address issues and concerns raised by students in various colleges. Over the last one and a half years, students from various colleges, especially private colleges, have come to be a part of this collective. The TSO addresses some very substantial issues dealing with rights and entitlements of students. As a part of their efforts they try to arrange seminars, panel discussions, meetings, and awareness campaigns to address student issues.

A much-raised concern in these meetings is the difficulty in getting grievances redressed, related to sexual harassment in colleges. On scrutinizing rules regarding sexual harassment in colleges, it has been clearly mentioned that the UGC mandates the establishment of an internal complaints committee for redressal. On further enquiry by TSO, it is established that there is little or no implementation of these rules in colleges in Bangalore and very limited awareness amongst the students regarding this. 'Having a say and giving a damn!' is TSO's goal. From the right to question and the right to functioning anti-sexual harassment cells, to creating greater awareness and inclusivity among students, TSO aims to create safer, happier campuses in the city. More than anything else to create a network of students who are keen on working towards these goals. There are students across all fields of education, students with ideas and opinions to share. TSO is a platform open to all.

Varkey is the founding member of TSO, who now studies at Delhi University of Economics and is a member of the Students' Federation of India (SFI), Delhi. On the importance of a student's union he said, "There are students who hide their discontent and will to react because they are overwhelmed and intimidated by the nature of their institute's management. It's easy to understand why. The last thing anyone who has access to near unlimited amounts of power would want, be it the college management or the central government, is for the people under them to organize. Because of this reason – organising, within an educational institution in Bangalore, is a near impossible task. And 2 years of failed attempts have led me to believe that the only logical conclusion is for us students, is to organize outside of our management. This need not be a union in the traditional sense, but a collective of students from all the colleges in Bangalore coming together to create a platform for discussion and action." He added, "We must do this because we're up against very organized oppressors, from the right-wing forces that have taken hold of the government to the college managements, and within this system there is very little we can do as individuals. I feel that time is ripe for such an initiative; for students to politicise and organise across campuses in the city."

Talking about the importance of ICC (Internal Complaints Committee) and why the collective is into fighting lack of redressal mechanisms, Mounica Sreesai, a

former member of TSO and a member of the SFI, Delhi, said, "Colleges in Bangalore are spaces that are increasingly becoming averse to discussing matters relating to gender and gender related issues. Gender sensitisation programmes are mostly unheard of in private colleges in Bangalore. A good majority of students, according to our research, experience a sense of insecurity in approaching colleges or the management. One of the reasons could be – students are put in a space where they are not comfortable talking about matters such as sexual harassment. The approach of the college management in dealing with sensitive matters such as intimate partner violence, violence directed against certain vulnerable groups, and violence directed against the third gender must be known to students. This would help students to be more comfortable approaching the ICC in such cases."

Shalom, a student in Bangalore and a member of the collective said, "Gender based violence, in many cases is directed towards individuals coming from certain vulnerable sections of the society. In order to effectively curb gender-based violence both the students and anti-harassment committees should be made aware of the unfair power dynamics in our society."

In January 2018, TSO organised a protest in front of Town Hall along with students from various colleges from Bangalore fighting for the implementation

of the ICC in college campuses. And just 2 days after the protest, some colleges, contacted their students regarding the implementation of the ICC. This is something that TSO takes pride in achieving. Throughout 2018, TSO has constantly been working for the betterment of students and the further implementation of the ICC. They are also fighting against the age-old ban on student's union in Karnataka and are constantly trying to organize large student groups who have strong opinions on politics, decisions, and policy making.

"Developing a respectful and healthy space for young adults to grow and learn is a primary responsibility of every educational institution," says Shalom.



PHOTO CREDIT: RASHIKA N. MAKAM

## Take My Hand

*Sankeerthana Swaminathan writes about the need to unite two forms of activism*

#MeToo #BringOurGirlsBack #Feminism #BodyPositivity #MentalHealth #LGBTQ+ #PrideMonth

'Clicktivism' becomes real every time millions of people open their phones to see these hashtags staring them in the face. This generation has been called #ArmChairActivists which roughly translates to: a generation who sit and type away but don't do anything to change it.

"Though our politicians believe that as a generation

we do nothing practically, the change that comes just through four people that upload a story or perpetuate a hashtag is unlike any other," says Fiza, a 19-year-old Communications student. Gautami, a Journalism student from St. Joseph's adds, "The power to just bring up any topic of interest is amazing and one must consciously wonder what we could and must do with that power. The stories that are shared and the reach that these have are beyond amazing to watch and it makes you that much prouder to know that you are a part of this GenZ and GenX."

With the growing need for change and hundreds of issues yet to be resolved, a pulsating, educated people is a necessity. With the resources at hand, social media becomes one of the more inexpensive but effective ways to get to the thousands of people who want to tell the

nation their story. Though this aids in furthering a message that might otherwise go unnoticed by the nation, this only does so much. Activism in physical forms like protests, marches, or hartals have been recognised as signs of activism. With the emergence of a new platform, power and roles are divided and shifted. Social Media Activism or Clicktivism has been under scrutiny because people believe that simply signing a petition online or typing out a long paragraph on the current situation of the black people does not make you an activist.

A fundamental problem that has surfaced through research is that the people today, though enthusiastic and ready to take a stand, never do enough to inform themselves about the situation at hand. An activist is someone who does huge amounts of research to work in a particular field of social concern and then gathers a group of like-minded people who work not just in organizing a protest but also think of alternatives to shape this into something that will legally be enforced for the betterment of the people.

"Now it's almost a trend right? Just picking a relevant issue to talk about puts us under the pressure of having to sound smart. People think we care. Forget people, even we think we care. Sometimes it's this feel-good factor that comes with writing about poverty or women empowerment on social media that stops us there. We don't take it further. We simply don't have the time, right?" says Rufina Mariam, a 19-year-old medical student. That warm glow the youth of today feels in their bones after participating in an event and fighting for some good in the moment is also one of the prime reasons why genuine use of social media to spread the word is starting to be termed as 'Slacktivism.' People who do build a steady following out of this act of speaking out are also expected to do so no matter what the problem.

(Contd. on page 4)



1

# LACHESISM

n! the desire to be struck by disaster

My next step, when I walk,  
should be: left foot  
right foot,  
left foot and gone.  
Into the void.  
It should feel like  
a free fall.  
I'm waiting for the surface.  
Praying it's not water.  
It should be a large piece of land,  
with many small rocks  
that look tiny from above.  
But  
I want to get closer  
to discover  
that they're massive.

I should feel ticklish.  
I want my legs to jerk when I fall.  
But this time,  
it shouldn't be a dream.

## Take My Hand

Contd. from page 3...

In light of Mallika Dua's recent posts on Instagram, people's expectation of her to comment on the Pulwama attacks is something that genuinely describes the feel of being a social media activist. "It's important to notice that this medium of talking to thousands of people online also serves as a means of educating and informing the people. Though not every page and post that you share will go viral, everything that you share will influence 2 out of 5 people's opinions. This is important – to acknowledge both sides of the situation. Nobody is obligated to say anything on social media if they don't want to. We should all keep this in mind," says Ms. Annie, a teacher of History and English.

In light of the many conversations had, Vaishnavi Suresh who has been noticed as an activist who uses both mediums – physical and social to promote her viewpoints in one of her recent Instagram stories says, "I don't think social media activism and ground activism is the same. In some cases, social media activism is not even deserving of the credit it gets...Social media activists such as myself get spots in panel discussions, photoshoots, and money for opinion pieces."

It's essential to know that most online activists are those that have easy access to a crowd of people. A large number of ground activists are of lower castes – Dalits, Bahujans, or Adivasis who go unnoticed by the media and the people. Social media activists do not always pick up

from where the ground activists left off or amplify their voice – most of the time, they're both fighting for issues that are polar opposites in nature. If the two can find mid-ground and work towards the same issues, it would be complete usage of resources. It is issues like feminism, body positivity, 'Black Lives Matter' that have been furthered by the internet.

On asking a professor from JNC on his take on activism he says, "It is important that we have these discussions because back then, it was nothing but violence and physical forms of activism. It's good that you all use it to your benefit but remember, this benefits you first and then the 1000 other people that follow you who also in fact belong to the same privileged crowd as you. Social media has led to many revolutions and discussions. The presence of this internet is something nobody will ever be able to ignore, which is why we need to use it. But with the kind of multi-layered space this is, it becomes difficult to figure out what the truth is and what the uninformed opinion is."

To pit online and ground activism against each other will cause no growth but more friction. The economics of the situation will never not be there, looking you in the eye, but as a people who want to collectively move towards a country that has more space to grow and exist, it is important to educate, improve, and inform our opinions. #Learn&Inform.

# The Store Wars

Have physical book stores been affected by online sales?  
What makes a physical book store so special?

Meghana L tries to find answers

Every book lover's dream is to be present in a room filled with books. A bookstore is one such actualisation of this dream. However, in this Digital Age has the value of physically visiting a bookstore diminished significantly? In a survey conducted on 50 people between the ages of 18-30, it was found that 39 prefer reading books from a physical book store. Book lovers tell us about what makes a physical book store so special while book sellers discuss whether online bookstores have affected the sales of brick and mortar stores.

Ragini, a book lover says, "I prefer buying books from a physical bookstore because the feeling of walking through a bookstore is magical; the touch and smell of books as we browse through the collection in a store is wonderful. When we buy a book online there are no underlying emotions involved in the process."

Mr. Prakash Gangaram of Gangarams Book Bureau claims, "It [online sales] has definitely affected our business in the last 10 years. Foreign investors are looking to kill competition and their business model is: lose in the first 5 years, break competition in the next 5 years and then start making profits. They are not only competing by delivering books to people's houses, but they are also giving huge discounts because they want to create an illusion that books are available cheaper online. If we have to sell a book at the cost price to compete with the online book stores, it is not worthwhile."

"I usually buy books online because of the cheaper prices and door step delivery but many times the quality of the books turns out to be bad," says Adhirah S, a student of design at PES University. "This can be avoided when we examine books closely before buying, which is only possible when we buy books from a physical store." Krishna Gowda, the owner of Bookworm remarks, "We are not affected by online book stores because we deal with both used and new books. At least 60% of our used books are out of print and are not available online. We also provide 20% discount on all new books."

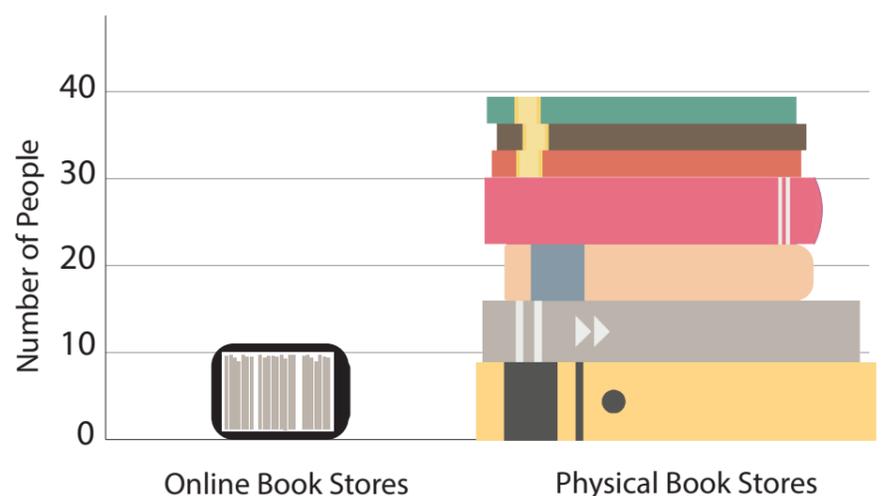
"Online book stores don't affect our sales. Apart from our wide collection of books and discount sales, people can come to our store and spend a long time browsing through the collection. They are even allowed to sit and read as many books as they want," maintains Mahi Gowda, pro-

prietor of Blossom Book House, which also briefly sold books online through its own website which is now disabled. The website is currently inactive due to the absence of a dedicated team to manage it. Keshav from the 9 month old Book Hive on Church Street states that he already has a base of regular customers which helps him combat online book stores. "A store such as this is built upon the trust of the customers. We only sell genuine books to a customer. Many customers have told me that they received pirated books when they ordered books online." Mr. Gangaram adds, "Our loyal customer base has been keeping us going for the past 20-30 years. Old customers now bring their children. People who have moved out of India come back and visit us to relive their pleasant memories. We believe in customer service and feel that we must be able to cater to the customer's demands. If we are unable to supply a book to the customers when they visit the store with a demand for a particular book or a specific author, we procure it from the UK or the US."

Pratibha Rani, a representative of the e-retail giant Flipkart says, "There is a huge growth in the number of people who purchase books online and the reason for this growth is that you can purchase various types of books from a single platform in a fraction of seconds. This can be done at any time by sitting anywhere across the world." Flipkart began in 2007 and initially focused primarily on book sales before expanding into the sale of other items.

When asked about what measures are being taken to tackle the problems caused by e-shopping, Mr. Gangaram replies, "There is nothing we can do except lower our operating expenses. Earlier the store was on MG Road and the reason we had to move was that the rent was going up by 6 times. When our lease expired in 2013, we moved to Church Street, but we are in a similar situation here too. All these factors have made us come to a decision to invest money and buy our own property on MG Road so that we don't have to worry about our overheads."

Mr. Gangaram conveys a message to all the book lovers out there, "Continue to visit book stores. A book store offers you information on enough topics to quench your thirst for knowledge and will never let you down."



# SAVE NOW, *pave for later*

*Kritvi Karthik explores why financial knowledge and awareness is a necessity for today's youth*

The world has dealt with financially rough periods like the Great Depression and the Great Recession – making it clear that one has to be completely aware of their financial options and all that they can do to avoid a monetary crisis in their lives. This knowledge, is especially important for the youth of the world we live in.

In the context of the Indian education system, there is little to no financial knowledge offered, apart from textbook definitions of what loans and banks are and what they do for us. Topics like simple and compound interest for mathematical problems throughout middle-school are about all we are taught. Children are shown how to apply the formula of compound interest, but not the power of compounding their actual assets.

The number one thing drilling holes in pockets of coming generations is the act of instant and premature gratification of consumer needs due to the availability of finance. There is barely any understanding of taxes, unless you are a student studying commerce, and there aren't a whole bunch of us who are aware of the kind of schemes banks offer to the youth, some of which, if explained and consented to, do not even require the help of our parents, which is the way most of us explore anything even remotely finance-related. Most parents fail to teach or pass on their knowledge regarding finance, especially stressing on the fact that 'money matters are not a child's problem to deal with' while discounting how uncertain life can be.

Financial literacy for students and teenagers should involve practical activities which introduce them to the working of the real world in monetary terms. Sanjay Shroff, co-founder of Rent Alpha Pvt. Ltd. and erstwhile SVP and Head, Investment Banking, Edelweiss Capital, explains the Marshmallow Test conducted by Stanford University, on a group of children. They were each given a marshmallow – with a condition – in order to study delayed gratification. In this study, a child was offered a choice between one small reward provided immediately or two small rewards if they waited for a short period – approximately 15 minutes – during which the tester left the room and then returned. In the follow-ups, researchers learnt that children who waited a while for two rewards, instead of an immediate one, tended to have better life outcomes – in terms of SAT scores, educational attainments, and other life measures. Sanjay says, "While schooling teaches compound interest, it does not teach the power of compound in-

terest and how it could help with 20–30 years of saving. Since the power of compound interest teaches one to spend responsibly, if these children were taught how to postpone instant gratification, they would grow up to be financially stable at the right time, that is, being wealthy at the age of 25 as opposed to at the age of 40, which would increase independence and quality of life exponentially."

Young adults who pick up skills they can truly apply to real-life situations are likely to understand and have a sense of responsibility as they step into the world. Imag-

ILLUSTRATION: JESSICA ANU



ine this – all our lives, we are sheltered by our parents who take care of all our basic needs. We have access to food, clothing, a house, an education, but never to the one thing that makes all of this go around in the first place – money. Most 40 year olds today, at least in India's economy, are indebted to all the loans they still have to pay back. Should there be any sort of a black swan event in the near future, an indebted individual would never get out of it. Talking about the one financial value the youth need to be taught, Sanjay says, "Postponing gratification and the habit to save and invest. When one postpones gratification, they create availability of spare

cash for them, which in turn creates a flow of cash to invest, and guarantees money in the future, tenfold." A financially literate person understands how to build a proper relationship with money – opening appropriate accounts, evaluating loans and loan terms, credit building, using credit cards responsibly, the basics of investing, and how to distinguish between a 'need' and a 'want'. All of this will help them avoid personal debt and increase the odds of achieving financial independence and security.

19-year-old Disha Shah of Inner Goddess, a financial-awareness firm of sorts, started by a group of young girls who want to propagate financial liberation for women, stressed on how important it is to be woke, financially literate youngsters in India today. "Finance, unlike math and biology, is not taught in schools, tuitions, or by our parents. I have always been a saver and as I grew, my curiosity to what can be done with this cash and seeing my peers, only boys, talk about the different financial products they were using made me want to start learning myself."

Since finance and its management is an important aspect of everyone's life, Disha says, "It does not stop, just stop, at financial information, at any point in life it might become the need of the hour for you and learning and having the pressure of making the right decision then often leads to unpleasant outcomes. Hence acquiring knowledge about the different aspects of finance at an earlier age gives you the chance of making well-informed and smarter financial decisions."

Disha adds, "You don't have to earn a lot or have access to a lot of money to save but ensure that you are saving at least 30–40% of whatever you get if you're a student. I say this because it's the easiest part of your life in terms of your financial needs because most of us are still supported by our parents so it is the best time to accumulate for our future. Get access to a bank account!! It's easy and every single bank account offers an account for a minor too. It's the best way to start your financial journey. I got my bank account when I was 12 years old."

Every young adult, soon to be a part of the workforce of a country, should have the financial knowledge which will empower them. "When you understand and learn how money works, it is no more a barrier when you are seeking opportunities, but rather a resource to make better and informed decisions," concludes Disha.

## SEX EDUCATION

### *Does it work? Is it necessary?*

*Despite having a population of nearly 1.3 billion, Indians refuse to discuss how we got there. Shriya Supreeth investigates*

"There is nothing wrong in a school taking up the responsibility of providing students with sex education... It's a place where lot of misconception and myths can be explained. The discussions can be fruitful," said Sonika Yadav, a school counsellor, at Bangalore International School.

Today's generation is bombarded with sexual messages and adults face the problem of raising their wards to be healthy and responsible citizens. "One way of doing so is by formally providing students with sexual education. By formally I do not mean that only schools should deliver this information to students. Children should sit down with adults and discuss it," said Aruna, a teacher in Sri Kumaran Children's Home (SKCH – CBSE). Several psychologists have said that talking

to youngsters about these concepts is the safest way of ensuring their healthy growth as they would not have to turn to sources like the internet or their peers to answer questions ranging from 'Where do babies come from?' to 'How do we make babies?'

When the students of SKCH – CBSE and Aurobindo Ashram were asked who introduced sex education to them, Raghunandan Sriram (18) said it was his school while Supriya Satish (18) said it was her parents. All students interviewed said that they were introduced to this with reference to good touch and bad touch.

When asked what sex education meant to them, Trishla Malli, a student from SKCH (CBSE) said, "It is the teaching of concepts like human anatomy, sexuality, re-

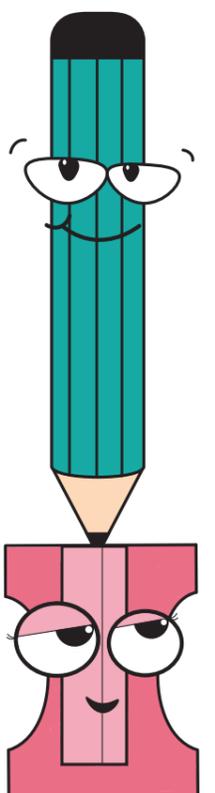
productive health, consent, safe sex, and other interrelated topics."

A majority of students from Kumaran's, Little Flower Public School, and Shibumi, Bangalore said they would be uncomfortable talking to their parents about sex. "It would be awkward," said Shreshtha, a 13 year old. Sanjay K, from Shibumi said, "I'm already really comfortable and well informed thanks to my school and I think things would have been a bit awkward if my parents tried to help me understand." However, a considerable number of students said they would be more comfortable with their parents talking to them about it. They also mentioned that concepts were formally explained to them in Biology classes in 7th or 8th grade. While some mothers felt it was inappropriate to talk to their sons, Sandhya, a mother of two said, "I see no harm in talking to my son about his body post-puberty, as I am as much a parent as his father is."

Sandhya Supreeth, senior counsellor at SKCH (CBSE) said, "A school is a place where a student needs to not only learn academics but also must learn the critical

life skills; sex education is a part of life skill learning necessary to help the students make important decisions concerning their reproductive health and also stay safe."

When the school's staff were asked about the ideal age to introduce these concepts to students, Ganesh, a facilitator from Shibumi said, "Children from the age of 5 and 6 are introduced to good touch/bad touch through books, discussions, interactive plays, etc." While Nidhi Arora, the coordinator of *The Children's Post*, said, "Children are old enough to know the minute they begin stepping out of the house..." *(Contd. on page 6)*





<http://indravasan.in>

## Sex Education

Contd. from page 6...

There is no ideal age for this."

In the course of the study it was found that the quality of sex education varied based on the socio-economic background of the family. Primary school students from a government school, in Doddakalasangraha, Bangalore were largely unaware of the concept as the teachers do not talk to students about it. The boys from high school said that they'd learnt a lot about intercourse from the internet.

A teacher, responsible for the middle and high school sections said that girls were talked to about sexual health from all perspectives as most of them would be married or would be sent to work in unfamiliar environments after finishing school. The teachers from the lower grades understood the importance of sexual education but saw no requirement for talking to their students about it. Pushpa, a housemaid, said she doesn't talk to her son about the concepts related to sex. "Namma manavarige bittidini (I've left it to my husband)," she said.

It is important that teachers have a positive attitude towards sex. Rajatadri, a 16 year old student of Shibumi said, "Teachers themselves must be free of prejudice and must not portray sex as a manifestation of the devil or anything like that." Sandhya added, "There is a great need for trained professionals to impart this knowledge and also several programs must be taken up at the community level to change the outlook of people; primary health centres may work in partnership with schools, identify parents who may be willing to contribute and also Anganwadi workers may be roped in to talk to the mothers of students so as to bring about a change at the community level."

There is space for growth in the area of sex education as its primary aim is to contribute to building a space that is safe for all and to ensure healthy growth of the population.

# Online vs. Offline: *the better learners*

Why are people gravitating towards the new infrastructure of online education? *Aysha Hilma* tries to find answers

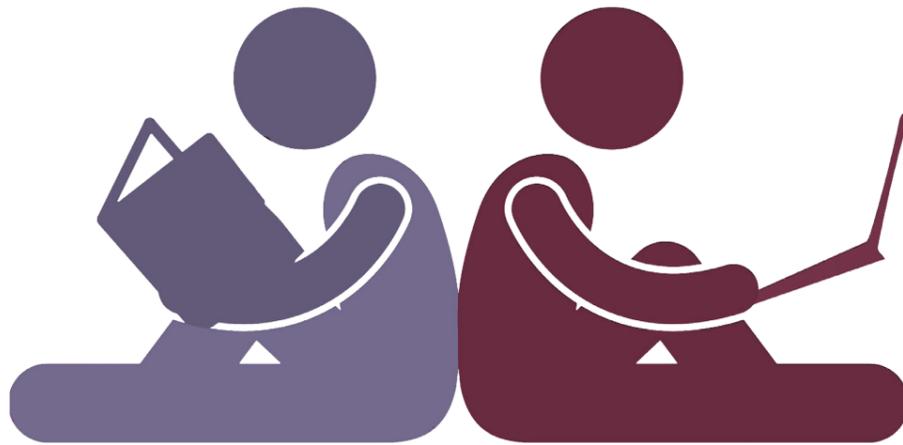


ILLUSTRATION: AYSHA HILMA

"It is the future, whether we like it or not," says Mihir Shah, an entrepreneur from Manipal who is in the process of launching his e-learning website. "Who would have thought 5 years ago that this could have even been possible?" In India, the 2000s have brought along a storm of technological advancement in every industry possible. Food, travel, groceries, and more are handled online, and education is now the newest member of the e-commerce family. As of 2015, India was already the 2nd largest market for e-learning after the United States. The sector is expected to become a \$1.96 billion industry in 2021, with an expected growth in the number of paid users from 1.6 million in 2016 to 9.6 million in 2021.

"In the beginning, it was a gamble. Nobody knew how the Indian audience would react because most of them are attached to their roots and the traditional way of teaching. The success of this industry was a surprise. A good surprise," continues Shah. According to him, the online system has become popular due to several factors. The main being the convenience that it offers. It cancels out the need for daily commute and gives students the opportunity to learn in a space they are comfortable with and at their own pace. Students in the online system claim to have less pressure and anxiety due to the relaxed setting in which it operates. Mirael Lia, a student of Mount Carmel College, Bangalore expresses, "Online education gives a lot of responsibility to the child to be serious, interested, and passionate about learning. Schools seem to take that away with its rules and punitive methods of teaching. I was home-schooled till the 8th grade. My lessons were online, and I thoroughly en-

joyed them. The problem with offline education is spoon-feeding. You are given everything. You can't even write it in your own words and learn in your own method of understanding because of the rigid correction system." She also adds that online education is only effective as long as it is done in a controlled environment. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), reveals that there has been a 175% rise in the average annual private expenditure for general education between 2008 and 2014. During the same period, the annual cost of professional and technical education has increased by 96%. Online education providers can reach out to the masses without setting up a physical infrastructure or incurring administrative costs such as staff salaries, stationery, books, etc. Hence, it is less expensive than traditional schooling and gives Indian students the opportunity to gain quality education from reputed colleges abroad, minus the exorbitant cost.

Online education now goes beyond the realms of secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary education. It also includes courses and modules for competitive exam preparation, professional skill enhancement, and other non-academic subjects. By 2020, India is expected to have the largest tertiary age population and, by then, the government hopes to increase the gross enrolment rate by 30%. However, the existing educational infrastructure is not equipped to meet the added capacity. E-learning can supplement the conventional model, and bridge the gap to a considerable extent. However, parents are not convinced. "They already spend more than half their day in front of screens, do we really want to encourage more of this?" exclaims Sagar Moham-

med, a father of 4. According to Common Sense Media, the average teenager spends around 9 out of 16 waking hours online. Increased amounts of screen time have been found to cause sleep deprivation, childhood obesity, and have catastrophic effects on the eyes. *Forbes* magazine says it can also cause changes in the brain chemistry of children wherein they are prone to fall into addiction pathways and are at high risk of developing mental health issues. This begs the question of whether subjecting education to screens is the right alternative.

"The communication process is 3 stepped. A message is transmitted at one end, it is received at the other, and then an acknowledgement of the reception of the message is sent. This process is incomplete in an online setting where the communication between the teacher and the student is minimal. The connection that exists between the teacher and the students, within the four walls of a classroom, is one that cannot be substituted," declares Aysha Mohammed, a professor of chemistry at Farook College, Calicut. The freedom given in online education, in terms of time and space, increases the probability of students getting distracted as there is no supervision, unlike traditional schooling. Aysha also says that classroom interaction is invaluable and this is when most of the learning takes place. "As a teacher, you are able to gauge your students' level of understanding and modulate your tone and the style to make it more graspable."

The scales weighing online education and traditional schooling are still in the process of measurement. "Instead of protesting the inevitable, efforts must be taken to develop protective screens that are safe for one's eyes and also develop methods that help children stay focused while online. A system should be established where there is timely personal interaction with the instructor," says Mr. Shah about the prevalent air of scepticism towards e-learning.

Despite its shortcomings, the technological age is taking over, so banishing technology from education may not be wise. Like Philip Green rightly said, "Good, bad, or indifferent, if you are not investing in new technology, you are going to be left behind."

## #58, Palace Cross Road

ILLUSTRATION: RASHIKA N. MAKAM



## Urban Indian Stories:

## TEEN PREGNANCY

To write her own story or to teach the little one to write?

Yukta Chopra talks to three women about their journey

Teen pregnancy are two words that always make someone's blood run cold. Often coloured in the same canvas as premarital sex, it is as much a taboo as a topic that is hushed and kept inside the four walls. According to the research conducted by the Health Department's Mother and Child Healthcare Monitoring System (MCTS) between April 2016 and January 2017, Bengaluru Urban had 8,099 pregnant teenagers. In the state girls that were 18 or under the age of 18 were numbered 59,717, making for 7.01% of the 8,43,857 pregnant women.

Dr. Vijaya Sherbet, obstetrician and gynaecologist, Cloudnine hospital, explaining the main causes of teen pregnancy says, "Teenage is a time of hormonal upsurge

and an awakening into what adulthood might be. For many teenagers, it is a time of experimenting or exploring their sexuality. In the backdrop of a lack of conversations regarding sex, and a surfeit of information without provenance, teenagers may develop mistaken opinions of contraceptives." The ISCE, CBSE and IG board in schools, make a chapter on sex education in biology textbooks compulsory, but all of this has only been a compulsion in recent times.

19-year-old Sneha (name changed) was in fact well aware of how to handle an unwanted pregnancy at 18. "My menstrual cycle is usually like a damn clock so I knew something was off when I was a day late. I was super confused because

I was on birth control but every preventative measure has a catch so...I took 2 pregnancy tests, and looked up gynaecologists near where I lived and made an appointment." She was accompanied by her boyfriend, throughout this process. Both believed that they were not physically, mentally or financially independent to raise a child, which is why they didn't face a moral dilemma at that point.

According to Dr. Sherbet, "The birth control pill is the mythical beast that will slay her health, her future fertility. And the easily available abortion pills are the magic potion that delivers freedom."

Tamanna (name changed), another 19-year-old, has been married for a year now. She talks about her pregnancy in a positive light, as a planned step, taken by the couple, as both wanted to take their relationship forward. When asked about whether she considered abortion, she said, "Termination of pregnancy never came into my head because both of us are happy with the decision and are very excited to welcome our new bundle of joy." She believes that her maternal instincts kicked in the minute she found out about her pregnancy. "My journey has been absolutely beautiful; this has probably been the best phase of my life." Unlike Sneha, Tamanna felt mentally, physically and financially prepared to have a baby. She believes that much of her experience with pregnancy has been blissful because she is married.

Sosomichon Chamberlain, who is currently 39-years-old was pregnant at the age of 19. She belonged to a Christian Missionary family. Pregnant before marriage to her Hindu boyfriend, Sosomichon was 5 months into her pregnancy, when she realized that she will have to keep the child. Both her and her boyfriend, now husband, were still in college. Her parents, were heartbroken but it

didn't matter to them if the boy was from a different caste or not. She says, "This did not mean that they weren't ashamed of my 'predicament' in the face of society. Being pregnant out of wedlock and that too with a non-Christian was scandalous! And it took a lot of courage and quite some time for them to stand in the public eye and move around their social circles again freely. Today mom gushes to all her friends about her grandchildren and how brilliant they are." She believes that many young girls who get pregnant at a young age, don't fully understand that it's quite a Herculean task to raise a child. This is also because of how sex education isn't openly discussed between parents and their children.

"As someone who was pregnant very young and as the mother of two teenaged daughters, trust me when I say that you should wait, your time will come. Wait, until you're emotionally, mentally and spiritually ready and mature enough to bring another life into this world. In the meantime, soak in all the experiences that life has to give you. Make sure you receive well rounded counsel from a trusted source. Be it a parent, teacher, medical personnel or spiritual guide. You don't have to go through this alone," she offers her advice to the teenage girls out there. Dr. Ashwini, gynaecologist, says, "A teenager who receives good health care in pregnancy may get away cheaply, and might only suffer the consequences of having a responsibility thrust upon her when she may not be emotionally and physiologically ready to deal with it."

It is extremely important for teenage girls to be aware and precautionary to avoid unwanted consequences. Sneha suggests, "For someone who is dealing with the same, I'd say know your rights; if you are sexually active keep track of your cycles like a hawk, look for a good gynaecologist and hang in there!"



PHOTO CREDIT: SHRISTI JAIN

## Abortion in India: what you need to know

Shristi Jain writes about the laws and social mindset surrounding it

Although the laws in India allow women to get their pregnancy terminated, social stigma surrounding abortion leads to women opting for extreme measures. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act of 1971 allows women to terminate pregnancies under numerous guidelines that are backed with medical expertise to safeguard women's lives.

According to the latest estimates published in *The Lancet*, December 2015, 15.6 million abortions occur in India that is, 47 abortions per 1000 women within the ages of 15-49 years. The MTP Act states that pregnant women in the first trimester (12 weeks) of the pregnancy need to consult just one doctor to have a termination, in the cases of 12-20 weeks consultation of two doctors is required, and termination is possible, after 20 weeks, only if it poses a threat to the life of the mother. Although, this law is meant to keep women safe, there are a lot of obstetricians and gynaecologists who find this act arbitrary and outdated.

Dr. Chandana, an obstetrician, says that the problem doctors' face is detecting the

anomalies in the foetus, which can clearly be detected only after 20 weeks of pregnancy. "In the case of anomalies, I think the MTP Act should be made slightly liberal." On the other hand, some doctors support the MTP Act. "It can be a threat to the mother's life if the foetus is terminated after the 20-week mark," says Dr. Suchitra, a gynaecologist. At this stage, she needs to get permission from the court, with the judgement of a physician along with the consultation of doctors.

A woman can terminate her pregnancy also due to a failure of contraceptives or if it poses a threat to her mental health, according to the MTP Act. Dr. Suchitra states, "We can't terminate the pregnancy for anyone who asks for it. We have to abide by the law." Dr. Chandana, however, makes a contradicting statement, "We allow abortions for women who request MTP under the pretence of failed contraceptives."

Women, who are 18 and above, can, undergo abortions by consulting a doctor, and if it's a minor, the doctors must consult the parents or guardians of the

woman, and in the case of rape, they are supposed to report it to the police; they cannot abort the foetus in such a case unless they get a court order.

India has a large number of abortions taking place every day, out of which 11.5 million (73%) abortions happen outside healthcare facilities. While unsafe abortions have reduced significantly, around 8 lakh women still resort to unsafe termination of pregnancies. Many doctors believe that women do not opt for safe abortions, due to the social stigma around abortions and also many minors and their families fear that the doctors may report the pregnancy to the police. Dr. Suchitra explains, "There should be better education in regards to safe sex and abortions. Then women can also approach us and ask for proper assistance." Women who go through unsafe

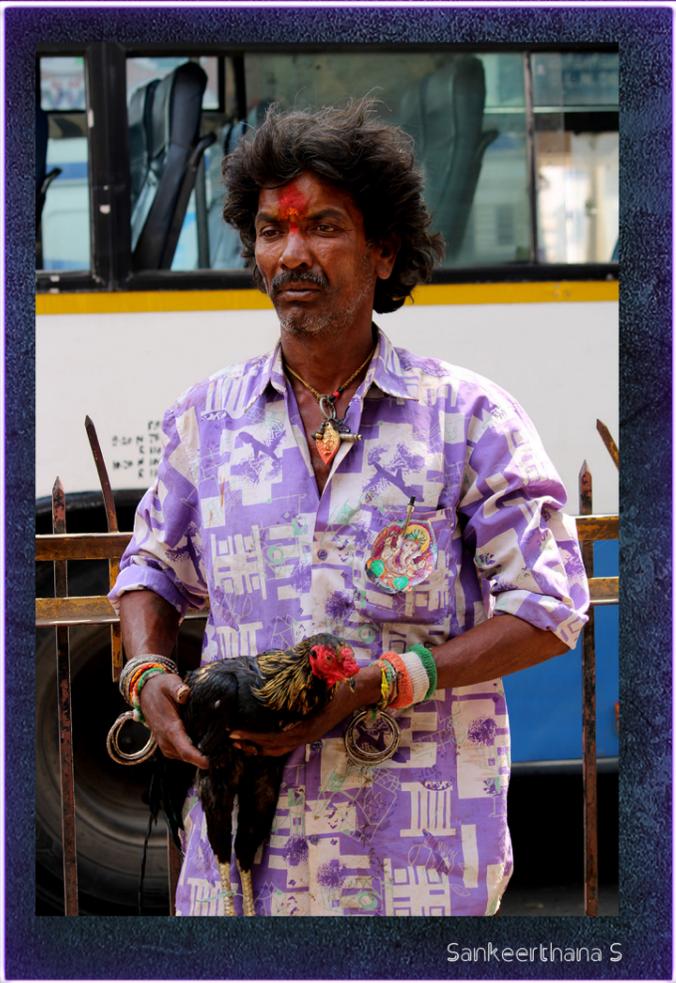
abortions, later deal with the complications related to it such as, septic shock, heavy bleeding due to 'over the counter pills', and haemorrhage.

The high number of unsafe abortions and unplanned pregnancies will hopefully motivate the government to come out with better policies and programmes to improve abortion services and contraceptive care. If a woman chooses to get an abortion, she should be able to access abortion on request at any point within the legal gestation limit.



ILLUSTRATION: JESSICA ANU

# OVERWORKED



&

# UNDERPAID



Shrishti J



Sankeerthana S



Shrishti J



Shrishti J



Sankeerthana S

# MILITARY, MAGGOTS & *Motherhood*

*Being a woman is not easy today, and it was harder three decades ago.*

*Lahari K.V. talks to Lt. Col. Geetha K.A., a girl from a small village who broke all barriers and stereotypes, and went on to to serve the nation*

She sits across me in the living room of her house in Mysore, clad in an elegant khadi kurti. Her greying hair is cut pixie style. She hands me a cup of tea and asks if the tea is sweet enough. She seems very comfortable with her body and weight and has a certain ease to her movements that proves one does not have to be thin to be fit. There is sunlight pouring in from the huge windows and into the room, giving it a warm cosy feeling. At 54, ex-army officer Lt. Col. K.A. Geetha, is still as active, energetic, and good humoured as ever.

Born to a Coorgi family with a father who was a government official and a mother who was a homemaker, Geetha had quite a nomadic childhood with her father being transferred all over the state. "Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be independent and that desire drove me to do things. I was quite a 'tomboyish' child and our dad often joked that he wished my brother was his daughter and I, his son. I used to get into fights with older boys at school. I liked earning my own money by selling coffee saplings and I loved buying my siblings things out of the money I made," she says recalling her pre-army days.

"So, how did you end up joining the armed forces?"

"That's a funny story, actually. I had always wanted to study law. But since colleges were very far away from where we lived, I was waiting for my father to get posted to a new city so I could pursue my higher studies there. So I stayed home for a year after my 12th and that's when a neighbour brought home an application form for the entrance exam for MNS: Military Nursing Service. I decided to give it a try too. Just when I had forgotten that I had written such an exam, I got a letter saying I had passed it and had to appear for a physical test...After that I trained in Delhi for 3 years and in the Air Force Command Hospital, Bangalore for 9 months and got commissioned into the army as a nursing officer with the rank Lieutenant in 1986. I was the first commissioned officer in my hometown."

"Did you face any struggles during your time training?"

"Actually, yes. The main problem I used to have, was with language. Not having had studied in convent schools like most of the other girls there, I was not fluent in English and could speak next to no Hin-

di. There were few South Indians there and we were made fun of for dressing differently and were constantly called Madrasis by the fellow students. I learnt the two languages by working diligently whenever I got the time, sometimes I stayed up all night. At one point, I felt like I was going to give up and go back but my parents' support gave me the strength to stay. Even my mother, who had cried until the second I left home, was proud of me."

Talking about her time in the army she says, "I had to move about a lot. Initially, I thought I was better off alone and would never marry, but eventually I found a man



Geetha being commissioned with the rank of Lieutenant by Lt. Gen. Kapur in Jan, 1987

and married him at 32. He was an engineer in the Navy and is really caring and supportive – I'm very thankful for that. I had thought my family would be apprehensive about accepting him since he belonged to a different caste, but that did not happen. Everyone is on great terms, even today...Even when you get married just make sure you really love him, everything else will sort itself," she laughs.

"I worked in the Burns Intensive Care Unit at every hospital I was posted in: Chandigarh, Chandimandir, Gwalior, Delhi, Yol, Pune, and other cities. On my 2nd day at work, a 19 year old wife of a young sepoy with 100% burns in her body was left under my care. The first aid that

the villagers had given her had caused maggots in her body. She died 2 days after being admitted and I could not eat anything for a week. When another man came in with 100% burns after that and died, the doctor incharge made us peel the burnt skin off his body so we would get used to what was coming. However, after a while, the burns did not bother me anymore and all I cared about was making them feel as less pain as possible. We also had to be there for them emotionally as most of them were also in a lot of emotional pain after having been disfigured completely."

"Did the Kargil War affect you in any

er guarded since they will be dismissed from duty immediately if found guilty. There were also a few men who were to work under me who did not feel very comfortable taking orders from a woman."

"I started planning to retire voluntarily in 2007 and got around to being able to actually do it in 2015. I felt like I was not being able to give enough time and care to my family. I had 100% job satisfaction and I badly wanted to spend more time with my family, especially my son. My mother got sick around the same time and that's when we decided to settle down in Mysore. My husband works as an engineer for the Indian Railways and my son is in 12th standard now. I also have my mother-in-law to take care of."

"I heard, you were bearing the college expenses of two girls from poor backgrounds?"

"Oh yes, one of them doesn't know that yet. I'm just doing it because I feel blessed that I have so much. And it makes me feel good that I can help change their lives."

"What's your life like now?"

"I have wanted to join yoga classes for a while now, but I still don't get the time. I go to the gym sometimes. I read books. Another hobby of mine is picking a fight with the gentleman who lives two houses away and always throws garbage on the side of the road." She pushes her glasses to the top of her head and continues, "I don't have people to accompany me to the movies or go shopping, so I don't, unless my niece comes home from college. Days pass by quickly because I always have something or the other to do. Life is quieter here, but I certainly do miss the restless but disciplined military lifestyle. I wanted to retire with the rank Lieutenant, but, I am so satisfied with my years of serving the nation. Now I just want a peaceful life ahead and want to see my son achieve greater things."

Lt. Col. K.A. Geetha truly shows that empowerment is more than just talking; it's about going out there and proving things – to yourself and the world. In her own words, "You need to give up on something to get another thing. It's all about finding that balance. You may lose your balance trying to find it, but it's not at all impossible to attain."



**SMILE** WITH

**PHISON**  
Knows What You Need  
Phison Electronics Corp.

CONTACT US @

- ▶ Sharing NAND flash technology and applications
- ▶ Making students internship and work ready
- ▶ Creating awareness of design and storage solutions



SMILE: guptaashita@smileelectronics.com  
PHISON: sales@phison.com



SMILE: #13 Bhattarahalli K.R Puram  
Bangalore – 560049

PHISON: No. 1, Qunyi Road, Zhunan Township,  
Miaoli County, Taiwan

# ATHEISM: The Growing Air of Disbelief

An exposé on the religion of the decade by *Aysha Hilma*

Since the beginning of time, religion has been a steadfast institution that has had a major influence on peoples' lives. In literature, religion can be traced back to Ancient Greece where people are believed to have worshipped Olympian gods. Soon, the Torah became widespread in the regions of Israel with the advent of Judaism. In 1st Century A.D., Christianity, which is now the largest religion in the world, was born. 6th century A.D. saw the birth of the last of the major Abrahamic religions, Islam. But that is not all. Since then, various other religions have erupted around the world, nearing a total of 4,200. However, recently a new religion has been taking over at an intense pace – the religion of no religion. In other words, Atheism. What is the reason for the sudden onset of disbelief? Let's find out.

The basis of Atheism, according to John Dewey, co-author of the *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933), comes from the belief that, "There is no God and there is no soul. Hence, there are no needs for the props of traditional religion. With dogma and creed excluded, then immutable truth is also dead and buried. There is no room for fixed, natural law or moral absolutes." Atheism is thus a rejection of the assertion that there are gods.

The census conducted by the Government of India in 2013 shows that Atheism has quadrupled itself with an average annual increase of about 15%, since the last census conducted in 2001. *National Geo-*

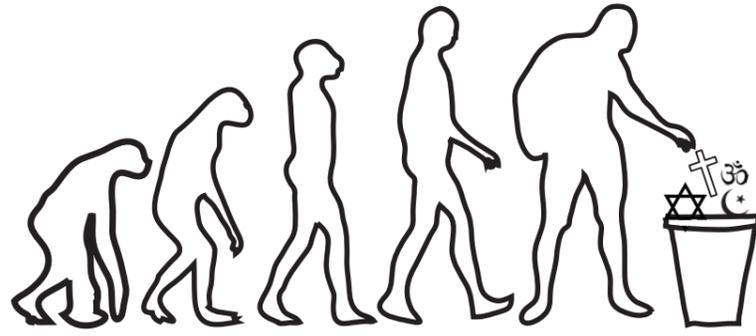


ILLUSTRATION: AYSHA HILMA

graphic predicts that religion will fade from relevancy as the world modernises and that soon, several countries like France, New Zealand, and the Netherlands will have majority Atheistic populations. China currently houses the largest number of Atheists, with nearly 50% of the total population following Atheism according to Kounteya Sinha, journalist for *The Times of India*.

In a lot of cases, the early indoctrination of religion seems to be the biggest problem. Tanvi Sharma, a student at Delhi University says, "One of the main reasons I became an Atheist is because religion was pushed down my throat. In India, there is no concept of discovering your own religion like in the West. Since even before you're born, a religion has been assigned to you and questioning even the minutest of things about this religion is frowned upon." The he-

reditary nature of religion thus seems to pose a problem for the millennial youth. Another leading cause of disbelief, is the dawn of the age of literacy. "As people got more and more educated, they began to question the very need for religion. They became more and more sceptical of the validity of the various religious beliefs. They started asking questions about the reasons for the different tenets of religion and certain parts of scriptures, the answer to which they found unsatisfactory," says Aalia Parveen, student of Culture and Religious Studies at Farooq College, Calicut. A self-proclaimed Atheist herself, she says, "When you are exposed to Science, where there is substantial proof for every little thing, you lose belief in something that expects you to follow blindly, without providing any rationale." According to Sa'ad Ahmed, an Indian student studying at NYU, the main factor behind Muslims becoming Atheists is fear. He says, "Atheism was sort of an escape

for me. I no longer wanted unwarranted stares or comments behind my back. I no longer wanted to be wary of going out and introducing myself. I hated the connotation that followed my name. I hated the fact that my religion was forcing me to hide my identity."

The growth of Atheism has been revolutionary. "I think the reason people hate the concept of Atheism is because they never thought they could break the confines of religion. They haven't ever dared to dream beyond what religion has allowed them," says Parveen. According to new research published by psychologist, Corey Cook, the driving antagonism toward Atheists stems from the fact that they threaten the comforting narratives that give meaning to so many people's lives, and makes the thought of death bearable. In India, there have been several incidents of hate crimes against Atheists like the killing of anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar in 2013 and that of M.M. Kalburgi, a writer who criticized idol worship, in 2015. This brings to light the intolerance that Atheists in the country are subjected to. With the impending arrival of Generation Alpha, who are supposed to be the wealthiest, smartest, and most long-living generation of all time, the world must aim to be more accepting in their approach towards others' beliefs. As Paulo Coelho once said, "In order to have faith in his own path, he does not need to prove that someone else's path is wrong."

## (White) Washed in the Blood

How is it that a religion founded by a Jew 2000 years ago is now dominated by the White Western Male? And at what cost to culture?

Grace Prince investigates

A class of first year Communication Studies students at Mount Carmel College had studied Augustine in their 1st semester and when asked if they'd known that he was a black man, 0.78% said that they had. The colour Christianity has been tinted in, over centuries, is embodied in examples like this and in the words of Jeevan Kumar, now pastor of a church on the outskirts of Bangalore, "I grew up hearing that Christianity is a Western religion and Jesus is a foreign God."

Brandon Munson, a lay minister from Philadelphia, suggests that the same way the Ethiopian Orthodox Church portrayed all the saints as Ethiopian, the Europeans portrayed all saints to look like them. With the rise in colonialism however, this depiction of all saints as white would have dire consequences: "This affected the psyche of the people groups who were dominated or converted. It was not like this was the goal all along...it was just an unfortunate list of ingredients that crossed paths at the same time."

"From head-hunters we became soul-hunters," Rev. Peter Kashung of Manipur spoke of the cultural erasure that took place with the coming of American Baptist missionaries to the North-East. The tribal men traditionally wore their hair in a mohawk but this was discouraged as the foreigners attempted to impose more Western haircuts on them. "There is nothing in the Bible against

keeping our traditional hairstyle. They have spoilt our folklore as well; we have beautiful music and beautiful songs... but instead, they taught us tonic sol-fa and staff notation. The Nagas have beautiful clothes and that should have been retained but they taught us how to wear a coat and how to wear long pants..." Pastor Daniel M. of North Bengal had this to say, "Indian culture and traditions are deeply rooted in their religious belief systems. Therefore, when someone decides to follow the teachings of Christ, there will definitely be changes involved." The senior pastor of Daniel, who happens to be an American, posted a provocative statement on Instagram in 2018 about how "real Christian women do not wear bindis."

According to Jeevan Kumar, "A decade ago our prayer style was with reverence to God. Therefore, we used to take bath and pray only on our knees but now prayer has become more casual. I'm not saying you should pray only when you take bath or only on your knees; I am saying churches are running with the culture." The Indian tradition of bowing and touching the feet of elders to show respect is also frowned upon in some churches. He says this is because they are taught that scriptures command one to bow before God alone.

"Indian preaching is always going to be loud, always going to be passionate... be-

cause that's the Indian way of presenting arguments. I like that. I don't like it when I see Indian preachers, in effect, imitating the West." Rev. Glen Aries is an Englishman who has lived in India for the last 18 years, working with churches and teaching theology. He sees a large part of today's Christianity as being influenced by America, "I was talking to somebody the other day and they were saying that their American missionary friends are required to send back reports each month and much of the report is about the number of people they had contact with, the number of people who have been converted, etc... It's a financial thing. These churches and Western Christians tend to be very wealthy and they invest in technology that spreads their influence around the world; way beyond, in my opinion, what it deserves to be."

When asked how a religion, founded by a Jew 2000 years ago, came to be dominated by the White Western Male, Aries replies, "You have to look and say, 'What was the impetus?'... The message was the gospel of salvation that was meant to bring life and joy to all people... Now I think, that has been distorted over centuries because now the means is if you have enough money, or if you can post it on the internet, or if you can pay for time on God TV then I think you can have influence that is way beyond your gifting."

"I don't watch God TV very much," Aries chuckles to himself, "but when I was sick a couple of weeks ago I sat watching it and they had the head of God TV interviewing a guy who was 69 and they were proclaiming, 'Wow, you look amazing for 69!' – and I thought he looked 69 – but he was basically saying, 'On God TV, I'm going

to talk about all health care and about all these supplements that you should buy.' And the really interesting thing was the head of God TV, a guy called Ward, then said, 'This is so brilliant because we have people in Indian villages who are watching us and they will learn about taking care of their bodies and learn about these supplements.' Supplements that, by the way, are basically made out of fruit and vegetables. And I thought, 'Ugh! This is so appalling!' You're basically advertising a product that's going to cost them thousands of rupees when, by eating a healthy diet, by helping improve the water supply or by teaching them basic health and hygiene you could make a difference."

"The danger is on both sides of the argument you get into stereotypes that simply reflect both cultures. And I think we have to be careful of not saying 'all culture is bad.' The difficulty is where culture is not actually native culture but an imported one. For me, my concern has always been to say, 'What does Indian Christianity look like?' I'm not sure I've ever actually seen real Indian Christianity."



ILLUSTRATION: JESSICA ANU

## Is this seat taken?

Contd. from page 1...

"I was in Class 9 when I was hijacked from school. We were taken to the jungle to train; how to jump, how to fight, how to forage, shooting, running, hiding, every kind of training. We were taught how to survive." Soon, they were ready to move; a group of 450 students (around 18-25 years old, accompanied by trained members of the Underground or, as it was then known, the 'Naga National Army'. "My boss was also my teacher from school and he recruited me as his right-hand man. So, 150 of them were in the front and they had to move 1 day ahead. "The next 150 of us would move a day later and the next 150, after that. We were moving to Myanmar to go into China and the first group had already crossed. Somehow, the information leaked and we were surrounded by the armed forces on all sides... They began firing, from both India and Myanmar and we were caught in the middle with only a single pistol between us. I was arrested and returned to the police in Ukhrul. The officer at the station happened to be a Malayali Christian and he spoke to me in English. He asked me why I had joined and I told him that it was not by my will but that I was forced to. He then asked the Deputy Commissioner not to put this on my record and gave me 3000 rupees before he sent me back home."

In a survey of 100 Nagas from the North-East, 85% said they identified strongly as Naga. In a separate question, 52% of the same sample group identified strongly as being Indian and 10% did not identify as Indian at all. When asked to explain their answers for this, the responses were varied: From "Cultural and racial differences" to "Because I am Indian," "Because I am Naga," "Not treated as fully Indian and hence don't feel fully Indian," "I love my cultural heritage and am proud to be Indian," and every shade in between.

Amenla Jamir, founder of Roots & Leisure – a platform promoting local cultures – talks about how Nagas used to be embarrassed about the kind of food they ate, but she now sees food blogs popping up, showcasing different local cuisines.

"Young people are so proud, it's infectious in a way. Not just to brothers and sisters but to friends outside the North-East. They've started believing in themselves – in their identity as Nagas. They are so comfortable with it, so confident – not a 100%, but it's growing."

"For me, I feel that I am Indian only," Wangtoi, a gentle, soft-spoken lecturer from Manipur, glanced over at his colleague. Imti, Afro-haired and bubbly, had just finished answering my question, "Do you feel Indian?" He spoke slowly at first, choosing his words carefully as he talked about the cultural differences between the mainland and the North-East. I noticed his shoulders tense as he began to tell me about the villages in Nagaland and how if you said "Indian Army" in one of them, you would hear immediate cries of disgust and protest. The rape and pillage of the people is fresh in their racial memory. We sat in a heavy silence for a heartbeat; a deep set furrow in his brow, he said, "I am, by circumstance, Indian. Not by origin. Not by blood."

Wangtoi admitted that the mechanism through which Manipur became a part of India was all very shady but he said that was finished; he was a man born into an independent India and felt as Indian as the next fellow. He believed other communities too faced discrimination when the minority-tables turned in the North-East.

Although he said he had to acknowledge this: "Our leaders are voiceless. They could go to Parliament and speak but all they do is sit and listen and come back." There is a fluidity to identity that is almost unpredictable; the shift is shaped by social, political, and economic conditions and personal experience over generations. Sitting across the coffee table from these two men and discussing their differences, the relevance of the direction of that shift grew dim. All that could be heard was the echo of a people that desperately wanted discourse, discussion, an active seat at the table and someone to occupy it, a voice.

# SHENERGY

Vrinda Dabral talks to a woman entrepreneur who aspires to provide opportunities for women to grow and succeed

"So, who am I? The day I crack this question, I'll have attained nirvana," is how Sonu Dabral, the Founder of Shenergy, introduces herself. Her name is a spin on the word 'sona', which translates to gold in Hindi, which completely matches her radiating and cheerful personality.

With an MBA in Human Resources, Sonu is currently based in Goa. "From being an educator, having run an institute in Noida, freelancing as a translator, working for a website, teaching both at the institute and at school, to handling a real estate project and doing interiors – my journey has been quite an adventurous one," she explains. A published author, she has written two novels for children, *Phantom of the Raymond Villa* and *Mystery of the Kungfu Panda*.

Of all her projects, Shenergy is closest to Sonu's heart. It started as a women-oriented website to showcase their skill and convert it into a mode of employment. This website brings together women, employed or unemployed, from across the country to share their talents. 'Do what you love and make it your profession' is what Shenergy preaches. This website gained fame in no time and currently has about 300 women as members. To promote this project, Sonu organised Shenergy Mela in which women set up food and painting stalls and craft exhibitions. The Mela was a huge hit. After this, there was no stopping the growth of Shener-

gy. This banner also holds cooking competitions, fashion shows, and exhibitions which have made many women empowered and confident.

Recently, a Shenergy *adda* was also launched. It is a common area where women can conduct workshops and classes. This project has offered employment to many women. Sonu is a feminist and believes that opportunities should be equal. She has always grabbed every opportunity that has interested her and loves challenging herself. "I believe that there are two kinds of people in this world – the 'doers' and the 'dreamers'. 'Doers' are also 'dreamers' but they punch in that extra effort and will to transform their dreams into reality. I am somewhere in between – a 'trishanku' of sorts who has a dream in Shenergy, a passion for life, and is trying to do something about it."

Sonu is an inspiration to her team. Her independence keeps all negativity away, and she declares, "Shenergy is my favourite kind of energy."

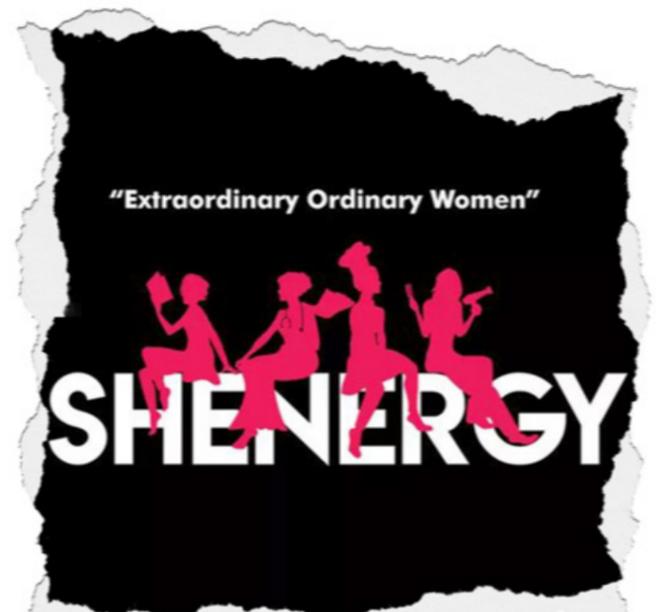


ILLUSTRATION: SONU DABRAL

## behind the print:

### DESIGN & LAYOUT

Grace Prince  
Aysha Hilma  
Yukta Chopra

### ILLUSTRATIONS

Rashika N. Makam  
Jessica Anu  
Grace Prince  
Aysha Hilma

### EDITING & PROOFREADING

Meghana L  
Lahari K V  
Grace Prince



### PROJECT MANAGERS

Kritvi Karthik  
Rashika N. Makam

### PHOTOGRAPHY

Shrishti Jain  
Sankeerthana S  
Lahari K V  
Vrinda Dabral

### FINANCE

Sharanya M  
Sankeerthana S  
Meghana L  
Rashika N. Makam  
Lahari K V  
Vrinda Dabral

### PRINTING

Shriya Supreeth  
Aysha Hilma