Linchpin™

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THE
CHANGEMAKER
edition

Featuring **Linchpins** who exemplify the change they wish to see in the world



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Linchpin (noun)

/ˈlɪn(t)ʃpɪn/

A pivotal force that holds a group, enterprise, organisation, or system together.

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editor's note

It is the best of times. It is the worst of times.

Dickens may have written this in 1859, but he might as well be speaking about the world today. We're living through extraordinary advances in science, medicine, and technology. And yet, human life often feels cheaper than ever.

James Baldwin once said that the world is held together by the love and attention of a very few people. That, without them, despair would be the logical response.

We've had (at Linchpin Magazine and elsewhere) endless conversations about the point of it all. About how you keep going when hate, exploitation, and indifference are treated as business as usual.

How do you exist in a world that has embraced self-interest with wilful abandon without coming undone?

It’s as if we’ve immunised ourselves against kindness and empathy.

So maybe the only antidote is change.

But as with most things, the word 'change' is used too easily. As if change comes from intent alone. Like opinions formed from a distance. Like outrage that grows increasingly strident with each keystroke, but asks little beyond expression.

But here’s the thing. Real change rarely announces itself.

It usually begins with someone noticing what others have learned to live with. A broken system. A quiet injustice. A fault line. A crack in the wall that our eyes once registered, then adjusted to skim past.

Baldwin’s words kept flitting about the edges of our consciousness as we brought this edition to life. In seeking Linchpins for this edition, we wanted to look closely at what happens after the question: what can I do? has been asked for the last time, and answered, imperfectly, with action. Not the performative version of action, but the kind that reshapes a life. So we held these words close through every interview, transcript and draft.

It may seem like our changemaking Linchpins have nothing in common. They work in different places, on different problems, with different tools. Yet, when each of them reached a point where the world’s disorder could have licensed withdrawal, every single one of them chose forward motion instead.

Like Hannah, who found her protest and then built the infrastructure to help others find theirs,

like Yogesh, who patiently throws every gate in publishing wide open so oppressed and marginalised words never have to be sanitised again,

like Durgesh, who connects people in places the world glazes over,

like Neda, who is giving voice to women expected to be radiant at a moment that is often anything but,

and, like Jonah, who is building a zero-waste community centering farmers in Goa.

This, our first edition of 2026, is dedicated to everyone who has ever felt tiny and helpless in face of the disarray that constantly threatens to upend the world. The world does not need more certainty. What it needs is more people willing to decide, quietly and repeatedly, not to be the ones who look away.

Change, when it lasts, moves less like fire and more like water. And like water, it will find its way.

– Karina



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the quiet infrastructure of dissent

I’ve learned that no one is insignificant

The first thing you notice, if you go to enough protests in the same city, is how familiar everyone becomes.

Hannah Lynn talks about Manchester that way. Anti-racism marches. Climate marches. Demonstrations against government policy. Different placards, different speakers, but often the same cluster of people moving through the streets together. You start to recognise faces in the crowd, even when you don’t know their names. You see who keeps



turning up.

For a long time, Hannah was simply one of them. A regular presence, someone who showed up when something felt wrong. Then friends began asking a simple question that stuck with her more than any chant: how do you actually find these protests?

It was not that the information did not exist. It was

scattered across Instagram stories, private WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, Facebook events that might or might not be current. If you were already in the loop, you might find your way. If you were new, or nervous, or far from existing networks, the barrier felt much higher. You needed time, context, and enough confidence to know where to look.

In early 2024, that question met a specific moment: weekly protests in Manchester against the occupation of Palestine. Shadow-banning and throttled reach on social media. A software engineer.

“I can build a website,” Hannah thought.

So she did.

a rough little map of the streets

The first version of what would ultimately become findaprotest.info began as a simple act of translation. Take what was already happening in the streets and make it easier to see. She threw together a site, “really horrible,” in her words, the kind of page that made at least one early visitor tell her it hurt their eyes. Design was not the point. She listed all the protests she could find and kept adding more as she went.

Then she fell down the rabbit hole.

Once she started looking, she realised how much could sit in one place. Ceasefire resolutions. Poems. Contacts for legal support if you were arrested at a demonstration. Organisations like Green and Black

Cross in the UK, and lawyers in the US offering pro bono help. It became an online pinboard for anything Palestine-related she could reach. It was messy, unsustainable, and completely driven by instinct: if this helps someone show up, on it goes.

Around the same time, she joined Tech for Palestine, intending to volunteer on someone else's project. Instead, she found herself bringing this unruly collection of resources into their orbit. Two volunteers joined her before it was even formally recognised. They began to help pull things into the site. Slowly, a shape began to appear.

When Tech for Palestine opened an incubator, she applied with what was then called Ceasefire Now. During the application process, they saw the core of what she was doing and said yes, but also asked her to refine. What was the true nature of what she was building? What was its purpose?

The answer, when she finally named it, was elementary.

Help people find a protest.

She registered the domain findaprotest.info in late May 2024. It took time to arrive at the name because "we tend to believe that serious work requires abstraction, or at least something clever". In the end, she went with the plainest possible description of what they were trying to do.

It still makes her smile.

what gets wired in early

Hannah grew up in social housing with a single mother and three siblings. Money was tight. Attention was scarcer than it should have been. When you grow up in those conditions, you learn early who gets listened to and who does not. You notice whose complaints are dismissed, whose anger is penalised, whose fear is treated as an inconvenience.

Her father, she says, has always hated bullies. He puts Israel firmly into that category. Her mother comes from an Irish family involved in unions. She took Hannah to her first protest and is still protesting in her seventies. “Those values got baked in early,” Hannah says. Standing up for people being treated unfairly feels less like a deliberate political stance and more like something in her nervous system.

It is not a cost-free way to move through the world. Speaking up can be lonely. People prefer to believe things are fine because it is easier. Being the one who says they are not fine is uncomfortable for everyone. She has paid for that discomfort in strained relationships, in the experience of being taken advantage of, in the steady erosion of some social circles. Even so, she does not see silence as an option.

“I would still rather live this way than compromise who I am,” she says. It is not a slogan. It has the quiet finality of a decision made and remade across decades.

That insistence has shaped her work long before **find a protest** existed. She has volunteered at food banks, delivered food on Christmas Day, worked with refugees, brought meals to people who are homeless. Consistently showing up for people who the system has failed, asking what's needed, and then doing something that helps.

Building an infrastructure for protest looks, from the outside, like a leap into tech activism. From the inside, it is another version of the same impulse.

finding the ones who almost join

When you listen to Hannah talk about **find a protest**, the word that recurs most often is "barrier". Barriers to attending protests. Barriers to organising them. Barriers to working together across causes. The early site was always about lowering those barriers, even if she did not call it that at the time.

She talks about the spectrum of allies. At one end, the people who keep showing up, who will find protests however they can. At the other end, people who are sympathetic but hesitant. Maybe they are nervous about going alone. Maybe their newsfeed is full of sensationalised images of police violence. Maybe English is not their first language. Maybe they have care responsibilities, precarious jobs, immigration worries. None of those things translates neatly into a retweet.

The question for her was: if the first group is already

showing up, how do you reach the ones who don't know how?

Part of the answer was to widen what counted as an action. **find a protest** lists protests, but it also lists solidarity actions and other ways of showing up. It is built for organisers as much as attendees, a central place where events can be found even when social media reach is patchy. When Instagram is shadow-banning protest content, for example, people can still find events via search engines. This is infrastructure, in an old-fashioned sense, created so that resistance is less dependent on the goodwill of platform companies.

Another part of the answer was to make space for people whose entry point is not Palestine.

find a protest began with Palestine protests because that cause is closest to Hannah's heart. The team thought hard about what it would mean for the site to be visible in search engines. They did not know whether search results would be quietly throttled in the same way social media posts were. There was a risk not only of suppression but also of being pigeonholed.

So they deliberately broadened the range of protests featured. She gives the example of the No Kings protests in the US. People might come to the site looking for those events, attend one, and feel "I'm starting to step in and make a difference." Next week, they may want to attend another protest. There is no No Kings event nearby, but there is a Palestine

protest. Some will scroll past. Some will come back later. Some, she believes, will go.

She has no numbers to prove this, and that is the point.

The site does not track individual users. The only data they see comes from Cloudflare, their hosting provider, which shows overall visitor counts and rough location. “I’m pretty sure I can’t even turn that off,” she says. There are no pixels, no personalised analytics, no funnels. A visitor is counted only once as a unique active user.

One particular week, when protests were surging in many countries for different reasons, they reached around 270,000 people. There are close to 7,000 subscribers to the weekly email.

Hannah remembers an early conversation with Paul Biggar from Tech for Palestine, who wanted her to aspire to hundreds of thousands of users one day. At the time, they had a few hundred. She cringed internally. The idea felt absurd, almost embarrassing. She could not imagine herself at the centre of something at that scale.

A few months later, that projection had become reality. She learned two things from that week. One was that Paul has “an incredible ability to see potential before it exists.” The other was more personal. Scale is possible when you stop dismissing yourself as insignificant.

The fear she has had to move through, over and over,

is the fear that she does not matter. That what she does is too small to count. The work of the platform and the people who use it has slowly worn away at that belief. “I’ve learned that no one is insignificant,” she says. Your actions can propagate in ways you do not see. That is true of a single person deciding to attend their first protest. It is also true of someone quietly maintaining the system that helps them find it.

The system itself reflects a particular form of care.

the cost of doing it properly

find a protest runs almost entirely on volunteers. Until



recently, the costs were paid out of Hannah's pocket. She has a full-time job and works on the platform in the margins of the day. Morning before work. A couple of hours after. Sometimes at lunch. For a long stretch, it was seven days a week. Her partner cooked most of the meals while she kept working at her laptop after dinner. Her time with family and friends shrank to almost nothing.

"It definitely caused problems with my relationship," she says, without drama. She kept going, but eventually she set boundaries. She tries to stop by around half six. She takes Saturdays off. "I'm not always good at it," she admits, but the intention is there.

At the time of publishing, Hannah has a 2-week-old.

"I'm curious too," she says when asked how parenting sits alongside **find a protest**. She does not have close friends nearby with children. She is not someone who has always wanted to hold other people's babies. Motherhood is new terrain. Activism is not.

She prepared for time away from **find a protest** for months. She now has a strong team, with people leading different areas of the project, and as more responsibility is shared, she will be able to reduce her hours on the platform. If they can secure more funding, some people could be paid for their time

Funding arrived modestly when Tech for Palestine gave the project a small grant, which now covers running costs. They can pay for a few tools rather



than building everything themselves. Before that, the decision was always the same: if a tool costs money, see if they can build their own version instead. It meant reinventing the wheel and living with limitations, but it also meant independence. When you meet people who volunteer every week, “that time is more important than money,” Hannah says. Her responsibility is to treat that time with respect.

Respect, for her, is not an abstract value. It is visible in the infrastructure decisions the team makes.

They avoid using tools and providers whose leadership is closely tied to what they see as conflict

or oppression. They are moving away from a hosting provider because its CEO posed for a photograph with Netanyahu. On the public site, they use Leaflet for maps instead of Google Maps, because they do not want to rely on a company they believe is complicit in genocide. Organisations like Sanity and Slab have offered them discounted or non-profit plans, but they still check where data is stored and how it can be accessed.

Everything they host that contains personal data, such as subscribers' email addresses, is kept in the EU rather than the US, because regulatory frameworks there make it harder for authorities to access data without prior notification. Even in the UK, she points out, a warrant could be issued for database access without her knowledge as the owner. “We do try and consider really carefully what tools we’re using, where even the data is hosted,” she says. They also take the minimum possible data. They do not ask for names; only emails. They encourage people to use anonymous addresses if they are worried.

This insistence on integrity comes from experience. She talks about a friend approaching her to build a site together. They wanted her skills and even referenced her previous work in their pitch deck. The value she brought, technical and product, was clear. But as the project developed, they chose to continue without her. There was no explanation or payment for work already done. At the same time, she watched them speak in public about women’s empowerment and values-

driven work.

The contrast stayed with her. “Some people perform goodness,” she says. “Others do the work quietly, consistently, and with integrity.” That experience did not make her cynical, but gave her the insight she needed. Success that comes at the expense of integrity, trust or dignity feels fragile and short-lived. How you get somewhere matters as much as where you end up.

find a protest is built on that principle. And it’s obvious in the way she talks about responsibility. “The people who show up,” she says, when asked who she feels accountable to. Volunteers, organisers, attendees. Being present. Following through. Treating people as humans rather than resources. If someone gives their time and care to something they are involved in, they feel a responsibility to honour that. It is simple. It is also rare.

more of us than you think

The work itself keeps evolving.

One ongoing concern is how to make protests more inclusive of multiple crises. A common criticism of the Free Palestine movement is that it ignores other conflicts, especially in Sudan. Hannah’s experience at protests tells a different story. At the marches she has attended in several countries, people often carry signs for multiple causes. Speakers refer to different struggles. “Everyone out for Sudan, everyone out for

Palestine," organisers will say, within the same event. Explicitly linking struggles brings more people into contact with issues they may know little about.

On the site, the team has actively sought out data sources for different causes so they can list those events. They are also beginning to think more deliberately about organisers themselves.

Through a collaborator, Dr Alexei Abrahams of Pillar of Salt, the team built an API to help them gather protest data into a visual representation of the network of organisers and influencers they track. The organiser map looked fractured, with many disconnected nodes. The influencer map looked dense and highly connected. Influencers collaborate on posts and regularly amplify one another. Organisers, who handle logistics and on-the-ground risks, often work in isolation.

One of Hannah's big goals for the future of **find a protest** is to help change that pattern. She would like to build an organiser platform where people who care about similar issues in the same area can find each other, coordinate, and share knowledge. She talks about running regular workshops, a kind of Protest 101, that responds to the steady stream of messages they get on social media from people asking how to organise an event, how to collaborate, what rights they have, and what to expect. For now, it will have to wait. They do not have the capacity.

Five years ago, she thought the hardest part of this

kind of work was convincing people to care. Now she thinks differently. There are more people willing to show up and do good than she realised. The real task is to create space and structure so that care can become action. Movements are often defined, from the outside, by their disagreements. On the inside, she has seen people put aside their differences long enough to do something together. Letting go of the need for total agreement has made her more patient and less cynical. It has also given her a kind of grounded hope about what collective action can look like, imperfect as it is.

The world is held together, James Baldwin said, by the love and attention of a very few people. Hannah would argue that the “few” is larger than it looks, that there are far more people willing to care and act than anyone realises. What she has built is a way for some of them to find each other.

The rest is still unfolding.



2

truths from the margins

How many people like me, who aspire to write, who want to bring their stories forward, but can’t because of the institutions which are simply beyond their reach… will their stories die?

On some evenings in Nagpur, the Library of Emancipation would fill up.

Fifteen or twenty people in a room is not much on a poster, but in real time, it changes the temperature of a space. People arrived after work, after classes, sometimes making their way across the city. Chairs were pulled close. They read poems aloud. They argued with films. They stayed longer than they meant to.

On other evenings, nobody came.

Once, for a scheduled book reading, Yogesh Maitreya was the only person in the room. He opened the book anyway and read aloud to himself. Kshitij, who helped set up and catalogue the library, calls it “a kind of madness,” but it is the kind Yogesh wears with ease. If a room has been made for reading, you read. Even if you are alone.

and yet we read

The Library of Emancipation did not last. The landlord demanded the space back. The books had to be moved out in a hurry. Plans were shelved. The furniture, the carefully built sense of place, disappeared in a few days. For the people who had begun to treat it as a small, welcome disruption in Nagpur’s cultural life, it felt as though they’d hit a wall while still in motion.

For Yogesh, it was not the end, just one more interruption in a long list of interruptions. The library was one expression of something that began elsewhere, with a different room and a different book.

the book that reconfigured him

In 2015, as a student, he met J. V. Pawar, a founding member of the Dalit Panthers and a historian of post-Ambedkarite movements. Pawar handed him five volumes he had written in Marathi. Yogesh read the

first one and felt something deep and dormant within him shift.

The book did not move through the filters he was used to. There was no softening of language to accommodate readers who had never lived the things being described. No smoothing of edges to fit the comfort of dominant caste institutions. It was what happens when a community writes its own history and puts it into the world without asking for permission or



Yogesh Maitreya

Managing Editor

Panthers Paw Publication

approval.

The experience left him with a practical question that never quite left him.

books that won’t seek permission

“How many people like me,” he wondered, “who aspire to write, who want to bring their stories forward, but can’t because of the institutions which are simply beyond their reach… will their stories die?”

He was thinking of people he had seen growing up. Brilliant, radiant minds, excluded from opportunity because they didn’t have the right surname. Caught in a society where “our ideas of beauty, our aesthetic, our philosophy of life” are all restricted by caste. Where there is no social encouragement for certain kinds of ambition.

So when stories are written but cannot pass through existing institutions without being sanitised or turned away, something else has to exist.

His first attempt at an answer was practical. He translated Pawar’s book into English.

He did not know how to translate. He did it anyway, asking people to read, to edit, to suggest. He had no access to the publishing industry, but he knew how to ask questions. As a reader, you grow up thinking “books are sacred,” he says. Working on this one showed him something else: books are political. They can be made to dull someone, not sharpen them.

A book is also a platform, and a platform carries responsibility for what it chooses to amplify, and how.

publishing that comes down to people

The obstacle, when it came time to print, was predictable. Money. He was a student with no savings. So he leaned on the one resource he trusted most: people.

His optimism is gleefully childlike in its candour. “Movement is about people, and people are resources.” Pawar was known and respected. Many people in the Ambedkarite movement in Mumbai valued his work. Yogesh asked some of them to pay in advance for books they had not yet seen. If they wanted one copy, he asked them to pay for three. When the book came out, those three copies would be theirs.

It worked. Forty to fifty thousand rupees came together, enough to print a thousand copies at a press in Prabhadevi. He remembers the press by name. He remembers standing outside a party office near Churchgate when the book was launched, without realising that an “inauguration” had been arranged. He arrived in a T-shirt, thinking it was a simple gathering, and found himself surrounded by bibliophiles from the Ambedkarite movement, people he had read, people whose work he was still learning.

He calls the experience transformative “not in a

spiritual sense," but in the sense of seeing a complete action through. Reading the book in Marathi. Translating it. Learning to navigate printing. Holding the finished object. Knowing that whoever read it would be different on the other side, as he had been.

"If I can publish one book, I can obviously publish a lot of books," he thought. He also understood something else: if he could publish his own work, he did not have to submit his stories to an industry that could not see him clearly.

Panthers Paw Publication grew out of that intersection.

From 2016 to 2020, he published six or seven books. After moving to Nagpur, he published another 20 over five years. The numbers are small in a commercial sense and substantial in the context he is working in. He has taken the books to the UK, Germany, Sharjah, and Sri Lanka. He has found readers in academic spaces and outside them. Some people now know him as a publisher. Others as a writer. The two roles sit together, often uncomfortably, but he keeps moving forward.

Money remains uncertain. He is clear that this disadvantage is structural and won't change without a tectonic shift that he may not see in his lifetime.

He pays attention to what happens when a book leaves the press. A poetry collection he published, *Blue is the Colour I Choose* by Tanya Singh, had a print run of 300 copies. It took three years to sell all of

them. Roughly eight copies a month. A few thousand rupees here and there across a year. “When you publish three or four books a year on those terms, nothing stabilises. But if a thousand copies of one book move consistently each year”, he says, "I can build".

Some books travel much further. *Untouchable Goa* is one of them.

the book that travels, and the Goa it carries

The book began as a mention from Amita, an archaeologist and writer, who told him about the Ambedkar Memorial lectures they used to organise in Goa with Dadu Mandrekar, a key Ambedkarite activist in the state. Dadu had written a book in Marathi, *Bahishkrut Gomantak*, originally published in 1997 in Aurangabad and long out of print.

The title stayed with him: *Untouchable Goa*, a Goa most visitors never see.

It took him a year and a half to find a copy of the original Marathi print. He then contacted Dadu’s wife and son, explained who he was and what he wanted to do, and asked permission to republish the work in translation. They said yes.

For the translation, he chose Nikhil, someone with deep roots in his own region, Khandesh, and training in both English and Marathi literature. The shared

social realities mattered. The translator needed to understand the idiom, the cultural shorthand embedded in the original. The work took a year. Publishing is “an industry without machines,” Yogesh says. “Humans are the machines. They miss deadlines. They get lost. They come back. There is no conveyor belt.”

Once the book existed in English, he carried it wherever he went.



In Goa, at Xavier Centre, the structural nature of the delay came up in public conversation. Why had it taken so long for this book to appear in English? What image of Goa did the state choose to present to the world? On another occasion, a planned event in Pune was cancelled when the bookstore received pressure from right-wing groups. They were told the event was “political.” The staff were shaken. Yogesh wasn’t surprised. The work would continue elsewhere.

Abroad, the responses have been varied. At a book fair in Berlin, he watched some Indian attendees glance at the blue Ambedkarite flag at his stall, frown and walk away. He has had people, from India and elsewhere, come by to ask him about Babasaheb. They ask him about caste. About the Goa of this book.

He speaks patiently, sometimes with dark humour, about the narrow image of India many people outside the country carry. Meditation. Yoga. Bollywood. Elephants. Curry. Goa as a holiday brochure. For those who are curious, *Untouchable Goa* becomes an entry point into a different set of realities. He tells them simply: “Get this book, you will see the Goa you have not seen.” At a recent fair in Amsterdam, he sold every copy he had.

Underneath the logistics and travel, there is a clear sense of what publishing does.

“Publishing is also a resistance against the ignorance of caste society,” he says. Caste thrives when people are kept ignorant, when they internalise hierarchies,

when they are denied the right to read or hear. He talks of Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule opening schools, of Thomas Paine's influence on Jyotiba. Books are one way people have found language for what is being done to them and what might exist beyond that.

Reading, for him, is basic. It changes the body's pace. It makes a different composition possible. "When you read, you communicate; you are in control, free to stop, free to go, free to ponder." It is not scrolling. It is not being pulled by an algorithm.

That belief sits alongside a clear understanding of what happens when books are edited and marketed through dominant caste institutions.

the politics of blunting lived experience

He has worked with editors who want to sanitise narratives. He has seen suggestions that bend or dull the rhythm of a sentence because it does not make sense to an editor whose life has never intersected with the writer's. For many Dalit authors, this is their first experience of the editor–author relationship, particularly in English. The power imbalance makes it near impossible to say no.

Yogesh keeps returning to questions of whose understanding is centred. When an editor says, "This does not make sense," who is being asked to adjust? He talks about the psychological weight of rejecting suggestions when you come from a background

where rejection is constant. “Saying no”, he says, “and knowing what to reject, is a form of freedom.”

He is careful to distinguish between editing that respects meaning and editing that smooths discomfort. He has spent time with poorly edited editions of Dr Ambedkar’s writing, with typos, missing references, and repetition that flattens the rhythm of the argument. Those are failures of craft, not political intervention. What concerns him is the “tendency to reshape Dalit narratives into something life-affirming enough to reassure dominant caste readers”.

He remembers being asked to do a “sensitive reading” for a large newspaper’s engagement with a book. His response was dry. Reading, if it is real, is already a sensitive act. If they wanted him to do it as an assignment, it needed to be paid. The deeper question for him is why sanitisation is needed at all.

He sees similar patterns in film. When viewers wish for positive endings from work rooted in Dalit experience, he hears a demand to feel better without having to sit with discomfort. That is where he draws a line. Some stories exist to introduce you to unpleasant realities outside your lived experience that you would rather ignore, not to absolve you.

His own writing has moved through its own apprenticeship. He started reading late in life. At first, he imitated the English and Welsh poets he encountered, especially Victorian voices. Over time, the borrowed cadence stopped fitting. His writing now

sits in a different place: between philosophy, sociology and psychology, between personal experience and larger structures. He has written about caste as “pedagogic philosophy,” about the self and deception, and about the way bodies move through social space, inside and outside India.

He does not want to be reduced to being simply a representative of a community or a symbol of a movement. He knows this is how many people see him. He is more interested in being taken seriously as a thinker, in having his work engaged with critically rather than consumed as evidence.

a cover fights back

The same refusal to be flattened runs through his sense of design.

Working with designer Shiva Nallaperumal and November Studio, Panthers Paw has developed a visual language that does not resemble the heavy, poorly produced volumes typical of Babasaheb’s works. The Ambedkar pocketbook series — small, accessible editions of shorter writings — uses circles and lines, abstract forms some readers see as blood cells under a microscope. The covers do not always carry titles in the expected way. Sometimes they function more like posters, built to be legible as tiny thumbnails on a phone screen.

Yogesh does not claim to fully understand every design choice. He trusts the people he works

with. He knows the existing visual cliches around caste — photographs of statues, familiar blue-and-brown palettes — no longer serve the ferment in Babasaheb's thought. The books need "a striking, new, fresh interface" in both layout and design if they are to meet new readers on equal terms.

That trust in collaborators is visible elsewhere, too.

When he invited volunteers for the Library of Emancipation and the Nagpur Collective, people arrived through Instagram stories and word of mouth. Kshitij came to help catalogue books and ended up being paid even when he expected to volunteer. Nakul, a young graphic designer and documentary filmmaker, showed up and was immediately asked to consider how his skills could fit into the library's needs, not as decoration but as part of the structure.

The collective around Yogesh is deliberately mixed. In one circle, there might be a nineteen-year-old, someone preparing for a PhD, someone in their late forties, someone working in an NGO. The only shared requirement is a commitment to Dr Ambedkar's ideas and a desire to think with them. From there, roles and projects are shaped by interest and capacity.

Nakul describes him as "a curious chef" as much as a publisher. Someone who will introduce you to a song on a long drive to Yavatmal, talk about the weather, then suddenly drop a sentence that rearranges the way you see caste or art. Someone who can move, sometimes in the same breath, from an analysis of

marketing as “based on lies” to deciding it is time for tea.

Seriousness and play sit comfortably alongside each other. When people challenge him or correct him on a fact, he does not treat it as a threat. He listens, laughs, adjusts.

Underneath the warmth, his view of the world is unsentimental.

He has seen caste boycott up close. During a month-long college fieldwork in Marathwada in 2013, he visited a village where a Scheduled Caste community had been entirely cut off. Boycott meant they could not buy food in local shops or grind grain in local mills. For salt, flour and basic supplies, they had to travel thirty kilometres by bus. The memory sits in his writing. It sits in his understanding of how fragile dignity is when it is not shared.

He has watched Indian elites abroad oppose anti-caste discrimination legislation, not because it would materially harm them but because it would make their behaviour legally visible. He has seen how, even under a strong constitution, laws remain paper tigers when those who interpret and enforce them are themselves deeply invested in caste privilege.

If people had homes, stable incomes, clean toilets, public transport, and minimum dignity, the struggle would move elsewhere. His own work would then sit in a different context. He would not need to argue, at book fairs and small events, for the idea that reading

itself is revolutionary.

At the same time, he does not see language as a weapon to be used only in one register.

He talks about anger as something that has shifted for him. Some of it has softened as his material circumstances have stabilised and his focus has widened. Working with language, he feels a responsibility to stretch it rather than blunt it. “To be strong does not mean imposing your empowerment on others,” he says. It can also mean making space for others to feel they matter. He looks to Babasaheb for that balance: uncompromising in analysis, attentive in address.

In a time of shrinking space for speech, he treats it as a challenge to make language “greater,” not smaller. To find ways of saying things that keep conversation alive rather than closing it off. To offer comfort without lying. To help people see that they do not always have to submit, even when the structure around them demands it.

Yogesh, you see, plays the long game.

He mentions that Mao and his wife taught children for 20 years in preparation for liberation. He often returns to Babasaheb’s insistence that social democracy must precede political democracy. He is blunt about how far India is from that. There is no common civic ground between children from different regions, castes, and languages. There is no shared education that produces citizens first and caste subjects second.

He worries about a generation raised on propaganda without access to texts like *Annihilation of Caste*, who may grow into adulthood with little sense of what democracy asks of them.

the long game isn't a metaphor

Change, in his view, will not come from convincing adults already hardened into superiority or submission. It will come from long, slow work that may not deliver visible results in his lifetime. Cutting libraries, shutting schools, building more temples than reading rooms: these are, for him, signs of a country choosing to reinforce caste dominance by dulling a nation.

He spends time imagining futures where there are a hundred or a thousand publishers from marginalised communities, especially women, shaping the stories that circulate. He wants to run workshops in publishing for people from those communities, not as training in a narrow sense, but as a way of saying: "This is what I have learned; take what you need from it."

For now, the scale is small. A press that began in a hostel room. A library that existed for a year and then had to be dismantled. Events where nobody comes, and events where the room is too full to breathe. Book fairs that introduce the world to an India beyond the Taj Mahal.

On the days when it feels pointless, when the news is exhausting, and the structural weight of caste and

capital is too much, he reminds himself that “nothing changes overnight.” Teaching children for twenty years is one image. Reading alone in a closed library is another. Somewhere between those two, he keeps placing books into the world and watching who reaches for them.



the wifi-wala at the edge of the world

Access is the biggest barrier. Once access exists, affordability follows.

In fifth standard, Durgesh saw a television inside a tailor’s shop, and something in him canted towards it.

The shop was near the rented house his family lived in, one of those neighbourhood spaces where customers drift in and out, and children hover at the door. The tailor noticed him watching from the threshold and invited him in. One day, he also gave the boy a needle and cloth.

Durgesh went back every day. By the tenth standard, he could stitch pants and shirts, blouses and salwar kurtis, even wedding suits. In the wedding season,

he travelled to nearby areas, taking urgent orders, working late to meet deadlines. Everyone in his family worked; tailoring was his way of adding to the household's income.

from stitch to signal

Then another screen appeared. An uncle who worked as a wedding videographer let him tag along. He held the lights, managed cables, and switched equipment on and off. The TV in the shop had been the first window into images. The camera was a way to make them.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, a third object entered his life: a computer.

His older brother suggested a basic course at a small institute. He signed up. The first time he saw Windows 98, and later Windows 2000, he felt the same pull he had felt towards the TV and the camera. He wanted to know how it all worked.

He learnt how to operate a machine and not much else, but it opened a door wide. He began dismantling and reassembling hardware, learning to repair systems, solving problems in tiny increments. Tailoring was now in the past, videography on weekends. Computers took over his imagination.

When a private contractor began hiring data entry operators for the State Bank of India, he applied. The job was simple enough. Maintain customer data for online banking, and fix the occasional machine. A few

Durgesh Ojha

Founder, Hybrid Internet

years of this quietly taught him how systems run, how people rely on them, how failure looks when a line goes down.

In March 2009, he tried to turn that education into a business. He called it Hybrid Computer Solutions and Cyber Zone.

The name came from a dictionary. He did not fully understand the word “hybrid”, just liked the sound of it. He rented a small space, built a few cubicles by hand, and set up a service counter. He secured lines from BSNL and Airtel. It was a computer repair shop and a cyber café, run with a friend who was equally interested in what the Internet could do.

Connectivity was still a novelty in his town, Guna. People came to check email, fill forms, browse. Demand was strong. What he lacked was financial literacy. Private loans funded the entire setup. Within a year, the numbers stopped adding up.

“I was barely twenty” he says now. “I didn’t understand business finances.” When he could no longer repay the loans, he had to shut down the café. For a while, it felt like everything he had tried to build had dissolved.

His friend Surbhi suggested Ahmedabad.

a city that taught scale

Durgesh went the next day, found a computer maintenance job through a newspaper advertisement,



and was hired as a customer support engineer on a salary of ₹7,000 a month. Working in a metro city, he saw, for the first time, how larger companies organised themselves, how teams and systems could grow beyond one room. He told himself he would start again, learn everything he needed to, and repay his debts.

Around the same time, he discovered that the internet could travel through the air. That even hardware like CCTVs could work wirelessly. Until then, connectivity

in his world meant wires: telephone lines, cables, plugs.

He moved back to Guna to use his newfound knowledge dusting off his previous company to offer networking and wireless security solutions.

A chance encounter during a CCTV support call introduced him to folks from the Digital Empowerment Foundation who delivered internet connectivity wirelessly to this computer centre.

He began reading whatever he could find on wireless technology. For nearly a year and a half, he studied how signals moved, what kind of terrain blocked them, and what hardware was needed. At some point, the study turned into a plan. He was hooked.

a hill, a temple, a relay

The town had one clear advantage: a small hill just outside the city, topped by a temple, high enough to serve as a relay point. From there, antennas could broadcast a signal tens of kilometres in every direction, reaching villages and small towns with little or no connectivity. There was demand. People wanted the internet for work, study, entertainment. Nobody had to be convinced.

In March 2015, he started Hybrid Internet Services.

At first, it was just him, some small loans, and a handful of connections. Within a year, he had linked nearby towns. The model was simple and, for the first

time in his life, recurring. Money from subscriptions arrived every month. The work was technically demanding and logistically complicated, but the need was constant.

In September 2016, after a particularly hopeful phase of growth, he went out with friends and got his first tattoo: a Wi-Fi symbol.

It was impulsive, but not random. For him, the symbol marked the moment he realised he might have found something that could sustain him, something he could build on patiently. Over the next two years, he connected dozens of villages and small towns, watching the networks spread outwards from the hill.

Through that work, he met two people who would change the scale of his ambition: Jinesh and Harsh.

They ran a company that had built hotspot management software, the kind that sits invisibly behind public Wi-Fi systems in airports and railway stations. They were looking for an internet service provider to handle bandwidth and backend services. Durgesh, separately, was looking for hotspot software to support his idea of community Wi-Fi.

The fit was obvious.

Because Hybrid Internet already had a working ISP model with links, licences and systems, Harsh suggested they start sharing their experience more widely. They set up a website offering consultancy to new entrepreneurs who wanted to start internet services. Between 2017 and 2019, they wrote about

licences, technical setups, tools, software, pricing, common mistakes. They took calls and travelled to see small ISPs in person.

Demand for that knowledge turned out to be scattered all over the map. They began advising operators in Madhya Pradesh and the Northeast, then further afield. They saw the same pattern in different places: enormous need, limited information, and a few dominant players charging high prices in the absence of competition.

distance as a business model

Mizoram was the turning point.

Remote and difficult to reach by road, it had some of the highest internet use in the country. Data consumption was high. So were prices.

“In 2019, ISPs charged ₹1,000 for a 1Mbps plan,” Durgesh says. “while on the mainland people had access to 50 Mbps for ₹500.”

The gap was less about greed and more about isolation. Operators lacked access to better bandwidth deals, newer hardware, or updated legal frameworks. There was, as he puts it, no bridge between providers and solutions. By sharing their knowledge and supply chains, Hybrid Internet helped shift the baseline: selling products at ₹200 that others were marking up to ₹1000, aggregating demand, and negotiating better rates.

Today, the company serves roughly 60–65,000 households, through 200 plus local ISP partners in over 150 villages. Their largest presence remains in Mizoram, but their footprint extends across much of the Northeast and into parts of Ladakh and Madhya Pradesh. A recent all-India licence has opened the way for slower, more deliberate expansion into other states.

The core of the model has not changed. Hybrid Internet focuses on wireless connectivity, especially in terrain where fibre-optic cables are hard to lay. Last-mile delivery is community-driven: in each village or town, they work with a local entrepreneur who



manages customer relations, installation, and basic troubleshooting, usually under a revenue-sharing arrangement. The central team of about 10 people tackles legal, technical, and bandwidth support.

“Locals prefer working with someone they know,” he says. “We just make it possible.”

the tattoo was prescient

As grounded as Durgesh is, the stories of the change his work has set in motion have a place among the stars.

Like Manjushree School in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, which is run by Buddhist Lamas for orphaned and underprivileged children. Funded by donors abroad, it had smart classroom infrastructre but no internet. No mobile network either. A donor reached out. After a survey and weeks of planning, they connected the school wirelessly. It was their first project in Arunachal. Today, Tawang is their largest node, with connections to households, hotels, offices, and other schools.

Or Sangti village, where locals had built homestays for tourists but kept losing visitors because there was no connectivity. “They asked us more than twenty times to bring internet,” he says. They launched there in 2024. Since then, the village has seen growth in tourism, online education, and even a few local influencers.

He is clear that what they are solving is, first, an

access problem. “Primarily access,” he says. “That’s the biggest barrier. Once access exists, affordability follows.” In places like Ladakh, they design small, low-cost systems that one person can manage, ensuring that villages with 25–100 households can sustain a connection. Commercial users, such as businesses, hotels, and homestays, often cross-subsidise household plans.

From the outside, it is easy to frame this as social work. Inside the company, the language is more modest.

“Nobody does anyone a favour,” says Harsh, his co-founder. “We gain far more from communities than we give. They change us.”

Durgesh himself is as unassuming as they come. Colleagues describe him as “full of character and principles”, “a textbook good human”, “a mentor”, “a brother”. The traits they return to - patience, calmness, a belief that intention matters - echo what his life has looked like: long periods of waiting, careful experiments, a willingness to start again after failure.

Arpit, who first met him in 2004 when Durgesh stitched him a pair of bell-bottom trousers, remembers one line in particular: *agar aapki niyat achhi hai to aapke saath galat nahi hoga, aur agar galat hua bhi to kuch naya sikhake jaayega*. If your intention is good, nothing bad will happen to you, and even if something does go wrong, you will learn something new from it.

That attitude has held through the café collapse, the

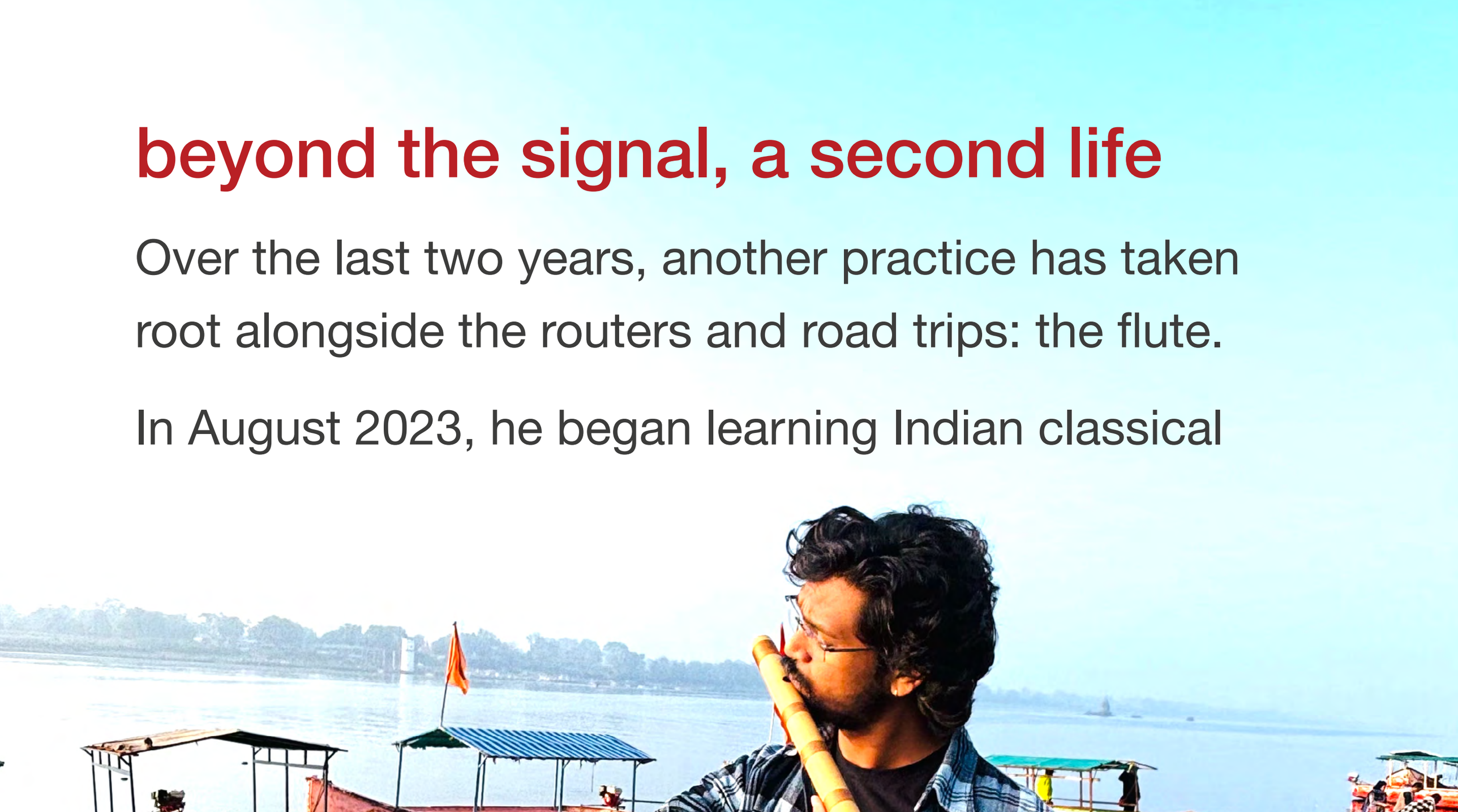
debts, the learning curve of wireless networks, the road trips across rough terrain, and the slow process of writing down what he knows so that others can use it. He has tried more formal learning systems, but still finds that the most effective teaching happens the old-fashioned way: phone calls, on-site visits, letting people learn by doing.

The longer-term vision is proliferation; something that came about from close collaboration with last-mile operators and a clear view of what they need to grow independently in a sector dominated by big telcos. He imagines a set of practical guides, simple enough for someone in a village to set up and grow an ISP on their own, even in the remotest parts of India.

beyond the signal, a second life

Over the last two years, another practice has taken root alongside the routers and road trips: the flute.

In August 2023, he began learning Indian classical



flute in the Maihar gharana tradition, first through online classes with musician Kartikeya Vashisht, later by travelling to Delhi for longer, in-person sessions. Kartikeya talks about him in the same terms others do: disciplined, hard-working, prepared, willing to sit for hours without looking at the clock.

For Durgesh, the flute is “a new life”, a practice that runs alongside his work. He carries it when he travels, plays folk tunes at local gatherings, and watches how music quietly changes the way communities see him.

Asked what success looks like now, he does not talk about numbers. He talks about being able to help people, “by contributing to society using the resources, knowledge, and guidance I’ve gained from people, travel, and lived experiences.” Most of all it is about shrinking the distance between a village and the rest of the world.

On some evenings, he practices the flute while his infant son sings along; on others, he's on a call with a village entrepreneur, troubleshooting a link. Somewhere in between, towers are installed on small hills, antennas point towards each other across valleys, and in homes that were once silent, a modem light begins to blink.



4

when the village logs on

The expectation is now hardwired that you would be able to manage it all. You're expected to be grateful to work from home.

In 2020, when the world shrank to the size of a house and a phone screen, Neda became a mother.

People tell her she was 'blessed' to have had so much time with her son, to have stayed indoors, to have avoided commutes and crowded spaces. It was not untrue. It was also not the whole story.

Becoming a mother in 2020 meant becoming a mother in a before-and-after world.

Daycare centres were closed. Household help was limited. Families were reshuffling roles under stress. “Caregiving responsibilities didn’t just vanish because I was home,” she says.

For her son, the first two years of life involved a very small circle of faces: his parents, his grandparents, and an occasional visit from her own parents when restrictions eased. When he finally started daycare, the transition was hard. Like most pandemic babies, it took him a while to settle into a new routine.

the afterlife of ‘work from home’

The pandemic rewired expectations: once women demonstrated they could work from home, care for children, supervise online classes, and look after elders all at once, it quietly became the new baseline. The infrastructure built in crisis calcified into cultural expectation.

“The expectation is now hardwired that you would be able to manage it all,” Neda says. “You’re expected to be grateful to work from home.”

What struck her most was how little structural change followed this upheaval. Work from home became a justification for inaction. If women could work from home, why did workplaces need to rethink maternity policies? Why did anyone need to re-examine childcare, return-to-work plans, or shared responsibilities?



“Before, you took a day off when you had to tend to a sick child. Now it's a casual demand: why don’t you just work from home instead?” she says. “The burden shifts back onto women, again.”

we were promised a village

Neda, a trained counsellor, had spent years listening

to other people's lives, but the steady, disorienting churn of early motherhood inside a pandemic gave her pause. "I saw a lot of transitions, a lot of changes that I felt I wasn't personally prepared for," she says. So she did what counsellors do when they don't have answers. She started listening again.

She spoke to other mothers. Women struggling with fertility treatments. Women managing painful periods and unexplained symptoms. Women caring for newborns in nuclear homes and joint families, in small towns and big cities. Over and over, she heard a similar pattern. Beyond the medical protocols and checklists, much of their journey was trial and error. They were guessing their way through reproductive health, fertility, pregnancy, and the months after birth. "I realised that there is very limited research out there," she says.

At the time, Neda was working full-time as a counsellor, co-parenting a toddler, and managing a home. But the structural gap between what she was seeing and what the system could name bothered her enough to quit her job and enrol in a PhD in maternal mental health.

"If there is limited research," she says, "then someone has to ask why women are so invisible in that research."

a digital room of one's own

Neda's research sits inside this landscape. Her PhD

looks at whether a structured, digital intervention can prevent or reduce depression during pregnancy and support women's motivation to return to work after childbirth.

On paper, the design is straightforward. Pregnant working women join a small group that meets online for a fixed number of weeks. A therapist leads sessions that teach mindfulness techniques, basic breathing exercises, and ways to manage stress. They talk about their pregnancies, their fears, their anger, their exhaustion. They listen to each other.

The women in her study work in different modes. Some commute to offices. Some are in hybrid roles. Some work entirely from home. What they share is the sense of being pulled in many directions at once.

"An initiative that makes them feel heard, makes them feel understood, can help in preventing the onset of postpartum depression," she says. "It doesn't replace family or workplace support. It adds another layer."

Neda's doctoral research was made possible with 100% funding from F Plus Healthcare Technologies, one of the companies in investor Aasif Ahsan Khan's biopharma ecosystem.

The analysis is complete. Early patterns suggest that these interventions helped women regardless of work mode, especially those who had moderate to severe levels of depression during pregnancy. The effect did not seem to depend on whether they were first-time mothers or had done this before. What shifted was

their intrinsic motivation to work and their ability to connect with their own values around work.

There were limits. The programme did not magically improve every aspect of well-being. Without follow-up sessions, some of the positive effects faded. Her current study does not yet capture how maternity policies, managers, or supervisors influence the journey back to work.

“Motivation is one part,” she says. “Actual return to work depends on many other things.”

She reels them out rapidly, a checklist she wishes more people would read: systemic interventions by lawmakers. A manager who is willing to plan a staggered return. A partner who is on the same page about money and care. Family members who share childcare. Physical recovery from childbirth. Flexible options to work from home on some days and come in on others. Paid leave, where it exists. Conscious planning when it does not.

“Mental health interventions are one place,” she says. “They have to sit inside a larger system of support. They cannot be the only thing.”

This tension sits at the heart of her work. How do you build a mental health programme that doesn’t preach to women to look after themselves better, while everything around them gives them very little opportunity to do so?

didn't they want to have it all?

It is a familiar pattern in wellness culture: when systems fail, individuals are told to meditate more, sleep better, drink water, and journal. She admits ruefully that if her intervention scales, it might place yet another burden on women to manage their own mental health, absolving families, workplaces and institutions.

“We don’t want the onus to fall on the mother,” she says. “There have to be other stakeholders.”

For her, the difference lies in where and how such programmes are offered. Right now, many are bolted on to existing structures as add-ons. Private hospitals sell birthing classes as a package upgrade. A few offer



prenatal yoga sessions. Very few integrate routine mental health screening, or even basic conversations about mood, into pre- and antenatal care.

She imagines a different use of the same waiting rooms she has spent hours in. A quiet room where women can do breathing exercises while they wait for their turn. Short guided mindfulness practices along with blood pressure checks. A standard question about sleep and mood that is asked with the same seriousness as questions about blood sugar.

Workplaces, too, come up often in her examples. If companies can build lactation rooms or pumping spaces, she asks, why not build in time and space for mental health check-ins? Why not offer a structured programme during work hours, rather than treating it as something a woman has to squeeze into a day already stretched thin?

“A lot of the women in my study loved that the interventions were online,” she says. “They didn’t have to commute. For that one hour, they could be in their room, and someone else could take care of the child.”

Access is the word she keeps coming back to. If institutions do not “weave in” support, she fears programmes like hers will remain for those who can afford extra time and money, while everyone else continues to be told to think happy thoughts and be grateful.

sisypheus got nothing on

motherhood

Recent global estimates from the World Health Organization suggest that around one in ten women experience postpartum depression. The numbers are not confined to any one class or country. They do not look impressive on a PowerPoint slide until you remember that each percentage point is a person somewhere, trying to make sense of why she feels numb, or angry, or nothing at all, at a time everyone assures her should be the happiest of her life.

Depression does not just affect the mother. It affects her ability to bond with the child, connect with family members, and carry out daily tasks. Left unchecked, it can intensify, leading to other mental health concerns.

Neda is careful not to reduce it to a single cause. She starts with the socio-economic layer. There is the familiar cultural script that women can, and should, “have it all”: a thriving career, a well-run home, emotionally nourished children, a good marriage, and ageing parents looked after. Nobody says, out loud, that something will have to give. Nobody spells out that different women may want different combinations of these things. The expectation is implicit and relentless.

“Women have this pressure of essentially excelling everywhere,” she says. “They can’t falter or fail at any place in their life. It’s a very unrealistic expectation from which men are exempt.”

Add to this the economic reality of life in Indian cities,

where a dual income is often the difference between basic security and constant anxiety. The costs of nutrition, schooling, healthcare, and housing sit in the background of decisions about pregnancy, timing, and how soon to return to work.

Then there are the biological and family histories. A woman whose family has lived with depression or anxiety may be more vulnerable, in the same way that a family history of diabetes or heart disease shapes risk. A traumatic childbirth, a difficult pregnancy, a long and painful fertility journey: all of these can become entry points for anxiety or depression.

On top of that sits culture. The rituals around confinement after birth. The rules about what a new mother should eat and wear, how long she should stay indoors, and how quickly she should “bounce back.” Every community has its own codes. Many offer comfort and structure. Many also carry unspoken messages about what pain a woman is expected to endure in silence.

“We’re told over and over that pain is integral to motherhood,” she says. “Feeling low just becomes a part of motherhood. It’s okay, it will go away. Nobody says: It’s not okay, let’s talk about this.”

In that environment, postpartum depression is both prevalent and invisible. Hospitals want smiling mums on glossy brochures. Families want reassurance that the baby and mother are “fine.” Social media collapses complex experiences into five hacks and

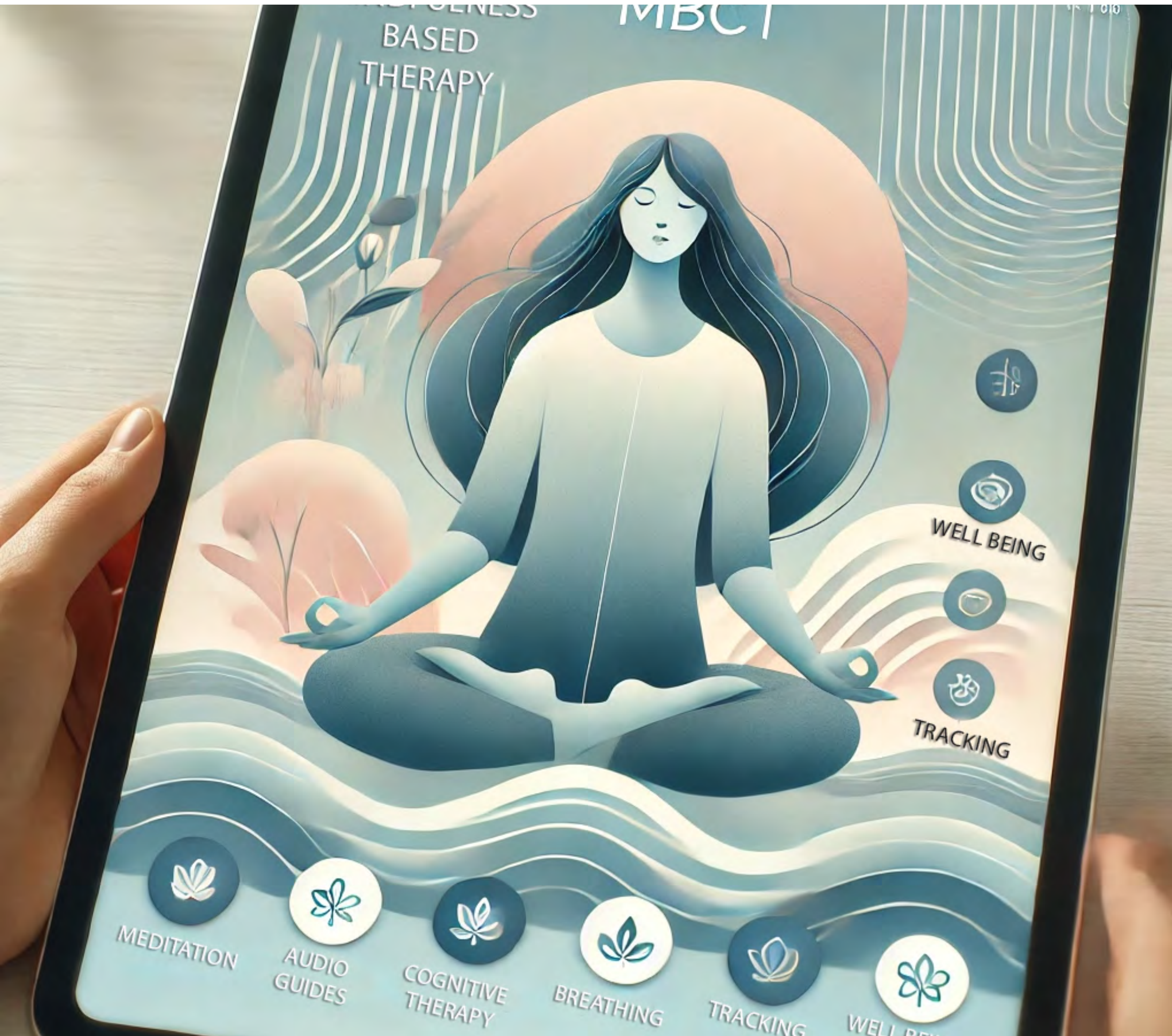
three affirmations. The word “depression” itself carries so much stigma that people dance around it, calling it “stress” or “mood swings” until something breaks.

building that village on purpose

The question of scale returns often in Neda’s answers. She is very clear that an intervention like hers cannot be a single product. It has to behave more like a network.

“If we go by the saying that it takes a village to raise a child,” she says, “then the entire village needs to come together to help the mother as well.”

In practice, that means different things for different women. For an urban professional with reliable



internet, it might be an app with recorded modules, live group sessions, and the option to book one-on-one time with a therapist. For someone in a smaller town or village, it might be a web link shared by a doctor on WhatsApp, or a call into a facilitated group on a basic smartphone.

She imagines the intervention in layers - therapist-led groups, recorded materials in multiple languages, trusted experts answering questions about gynaecology, fertility and mental health. On the ground, community leaders and frontline health workers. “They don’t have to run the interventions,” she says. “But when they say this is important, that’s how word-of-mouth begins.”

For now, digital feels like the most honest starting point. “Right now, the only way I can reach a woman who’s working in Bangalore and a woman in tribal Odisha is through a mobile phone,” she says. If the content can reach her where she is, in language she understands, it is at least a beginning.

She knows the risks. Smartphones are not evenly distributed. Data is not always cheap. Digital literacy is uneven. But she would rather start there, imperfectly, than wait for the perfect parallel system.

not all rooms are equal

One of the more delicate questions she sits with is how to design groups that are honest about difference and still feel safe. What does it mean to run a session

in which a woman who employs domestic help and the woman who cleans her house might both be present?

In her pilot, she watched how easily homogenous groups bonded: women with similar jobs and incomes, similar routines, similar reference points. But when someone with a very different life joined, the room would shift. Sometimes it opened up. Sometimes it went quiet.

Her answer is to make heterogeneity a deliberate part of the design, not an accident. The entry ticket to the group is not where you work or how much you earn. It is possible that you are pregnant or recently postpartum, and you are struggling. The work of the facilitator is to keep bringing the conversation back to what they share: the fear of not being a good enough mother, the difficulty of saying no to family, the guilt around work, the exhaustion of being told this is the happiest time of your life.

“If we can’t do that, then we’re just running classes by caste and class,” she says. “That would defeat the point.”

like making a baby

Getting a PhD is a long, drawn-out process. Quite like carrying a pregnancy to term and not without its ups and downs.

She tells of a meeting with the all-male board of a large hospital chain. She had approached them,



hoping to run her research through their maternity centres. They listened, then told her, flatly, that postpartum depression did not exist in their hospitals. Their mothers were happy. If she wanted to prove otherwise, they said, she should first collect prevalence data from their wards.

She did the work, but when she brought the numbers back, they were waved away. Her numbers did not match their feedback sheets. They refused permission to use the data.

She was upset enough to question her decision to do a PhD at all. She worried about wasted months and

funding timelines. Then, slowly, she reached the point in her own cycle she recognises now: the point where cribbing has done its job and the only question left is, “What do I do next?”

She turned to her Research Advisory Committee at Christ University, and together, they began to explore other routes: independent clinics, government health centres, and personal networks.

“It restored my faith,” she says. “They believed in me, so I felt I could do this.”

Over the next few months, she spent weekends in waiting rooms, talking to nurses and speaking to gynaecologists in smaller hospitals, and reaching pregnant women through posters and word of mouth. She was not, as she puts it, “cool about it” at the time. But by the end of the year, she had her participants. She had her baby data.

the quiet work of building space

When you ask Neda what has shaped her, she does not start with degrees or titles. She starts with motherhood and movement.

She was born in Uttar Pradesh and has lived in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and the United States. She studied psychology abroad and came back to India to work as a counsellor. That movement, she thinks, taught her to pay attention to cultural context: how the same experience can feel very different in different places, and how systems can

either hold you or let you fall.

What she wants, in the end, is modest and enormous at once.

She wants women, wherever they are, to have at least one space where they can feel safe enough to be vulnerable. She wants them to have access to accurate information, not just hacks and reels. She wants them to know that they are not the only ones struggling, that the problem is not simply a private failure to cope.

“I might not have answers to all the questions they bring,” she says. “But they should feel that we will work on it together.”

On a screen somewhere, a small square fills with faces as another online group starts. Someone joins late from a parked car. Someone else mutes herself to tend to her crying baby. For an hour, they talk about sleep, guilt, work, and bodies that do not feel like their own.

It is not a perfect village. But it is, for now, a room. And sometimes a room, held steadily over time, is where change begins.



jonah and the whale of our waste

If you're only asking: how do we manage waste that's been generated, you've already lost. The real question is: how do we not generate it in the first place?

The fields behind Jonah's childhood home in Siolim, Goa, were the kind you carry for the rest of your life.

Old village house in front, hectares of paddy at the back, a river wrapping around the land. His childhood was spent outdoors: running through the fields at dusk, swimming in the river, and wandering without much supervision. It was ordinary then. It feels rare now.

"We were probably the last generation that did it," he says. "Our children won't swim in the river or play the way we did."

He didn’t have the words for it as a child. A growing sense that something that had held his childhood together was being quietly removed.

The change wasn’t a single event. It arrived the way it usually does in Goa: slowly, then all at once. One season, there was a clear view across the fields. Then a compound wall appeared. Then a gated community with luxury villas.

Paradise paved over for parking lots.

before the whale, a cloth bag

Sustainability arrived in Jonah’s life in the form of a ubiquitous cloth bag.

His parents were the sort who would remind you not



to accept plastic at the shop. At the time, it felt like a small family quirk rather than a statement. He laughs now at how basic it seems compared to the direction his life has taken.

“Not taking a plastic bag now feels very surface-level,” he says. “But that’s how it starts. You pick up something from your parents, then other people take you one step further.”

One of those people was his wife Sasha’s aunt, who pushed them to look past the word “eco-friendly” and focus on use itself. A paper straw is still a straw you use once and then throw away. The material has changed; the mindset has not.

Another was his friend Eldridge, who ran a restaurant and wanted to turn it into a zero-waste space. The idea was quietly radical: source everything without plastic. No sachets, no cling film, no single-use packaging.

“It intrigued me a lot,” Jonah says. “We tried to see how close to zero-waste a restaurant could get.”

The restaurant eventually closed for reasons unrelated to its waste policy, but the experiment stayed. It became the seed for Ecoposro, their first bulk, low-waste venture, and later for Zeroposro, the zero-waste store Jonah runs today in Panaji, Goa’s capital city.

Another person Jonah learnt a lot from was Sanjiv, who runs Sensible Earth who incubated Zeroposro as it pivoted from a dormant Ecoposro into what it is today. A second quest took root: supporting hyper-

local agriculture, not as an add-on, but as part of the same resistance to single use plastic.

But before it all, Jonah walked a different path.

He wanted to make wildlife documentaries, especially underwater. He took a job with a scuba diving school in Thailand, shooting for them and learning underwater cinematography. It was one of those paths that look, from the outside, as though they've clicked into place: nature, art, ocean, camera.

Then he got diving sickness and was forced out of the water for six weeks.

He came back to Goa to recover. While he was meant to be waiting for his body to settle, Eldridge asked him to help start a zero-waste restaurant. Jonah said yes, thinking of it as a project.

"I just never went back to diving and shooting," he says.

It sounds almost casual when he puts it that way. But in that quiet pivot away from documenting nature and towards working on how people live with it, his current life took shape.

a different kind of dive

Jonah's definition of sustainability is disarmingly straightforward.

"For me, it's not having to take advantage of the planet, or harm it, for your wellbeing or success," he says. "And doing whatever you do consciously."

He doesn’t claim perfection. His own life has pets that need packaged food, a vehicle that burns fuel, and a house that, in his words, is “as sustainable as we can make it, but not zero-waste”.

Instead of purity, he thinks in terms of a quota: you will generate some non-biodegradable waste; the point is to stay on the right side of it. When he does give in to convenience or produces more waste than he’d like, he tries to overcompensate afterwards.

“Like exercise,” he says. “Missing one day doesn’t mean you throw everything away. You wake up and try again.”

There are, however, lines he will not cross. Waste segregation is non-negotiable. At home, all organic waste is composted in the garden. Plastics are cleaned, dried and sent for recycling. Food never goes into the same bin as packaging.

He will not take a plastic straw, even at a roadside coconut stall. “It’s ridiculous,” he says. “It’s the simplest thing to avoid and still one of the biggest contributors.”

And he pays close attention to energy, resisting the slow creep of always-on cooling and comfort. None of this is glamorous. It’s just quietly repetitive work, which is the point.

staples in a glass jars

Zeroposro sits at the intersection of two problem



statements Jonah cares about: reducing dry waste from households, and increasing the amount of food grown locally in Goa.

The shop sells staples like grains, pulses, spices, and oils without single-use packaging. Customers bring their own containers or reusable bags. On the farm side, Zeroposro works directly with Goan farmers to source as much as possible from within the state.

Running a plastic-free bulk store in Goa's climate is, in his words, "a lot of work". Humidity is high, the monsoon lasts six months, and insects thrive. Where a conventional shop can seal everything in plastic and forget it, Zeroposro has to handle goods more like a kitchen than a warehouse.

They keep stocks lean, buying only as much grain as they expect to sell within the month. Every week, sacks are rotated out into the sun and back in again. Each batch carries a handwritten card noting when it was last sunned and when it needs attention.

“It means more manpower and more time,” Jonah says. “In a regular shop, they wouldn’t need to do all this.”

He frames it as the cost of aligning practice with belief. Plastic, he is quick to point out, is not inherently evil; it’s the pattern of single-use, especially around food and personal care, that he struggles with.

On the farming side, the work is as much about relationships as it is about logistics.

paradise, slowly parcelled

Goa’s farmers, he says, fall roughly into three groups. There are those committed to continuing agriculture. There are those on the fence, torn between tilling land that pays ₹30,000–40,000 a year for rice, and converting a plot into a shop or rooms that earn the same in monthly rent. And there are those who have already made peace with selling or filling their fields.

“The last group, honestly, we don’t go near,” he says. “That becomes activism, and that’s not what Zeroposro is.”

Instead, they focus on the first group and gently try to pull the second towards staying with the land. It is

sensitive work. Telling a farmer to refuse life-changing rental income is not a request he feels entitled to make.

So he tries to make farming itself more viable.

“When we started sourcing from some farmers, a few of them began growing more because of our demand,” he says. “From sixty beds to a hundred, a hundred and twenty. Seeing that is very rewarding.”

Word of mouth does the rest. Goa is small; WhatsApp and Facebook have made it smaller. One farmer leads to another. Some weeks, he gets two or three new messages from people saying, “We have a small farm, will you come and see it?”



The change runs both ways. Working closely with farmers has altered the way he sees his own state.

“Growing up, you assume most vegetables come from Belgaum (food basket in the neighbouring state of Karnataka) or wherever,” he says. “Now I see how much can actually grow here. That’s brought a lot of joy.”

He has no illusions about government support. When asked what would help Zeroposro grow, he doesn’t talk about subsidies or schemes. He talks about basics: enforcing noise limits so he can sleep and work, maintaining roads so his delivery rickshaw isn’t constantly damaged, and keeping canals and field channels open so water can move and farmers can irrigate.

“If they can do their basic jobs, that’s already a huge help,” he says. “Beyond that, I don’t really expect anything.”

On waste, his frustration is specific. Panchayats and municipalities, he notes, think mostly in terms of managing what’s already been generated: bins, segregation drives, material recovery facilities. Some villages put out sacks at scenic spots, asking people to keep the area clean.

It’s better than nothing. It’s also, in his view, nowhere close to enough.

“If you’re only asking: how do we manage waste that’s been generated, you’ve already lost,” he says. “In the end, it gets burnt somewhere, whether in a backyard

or a cement factory. The real question is: how do we not generate it in the first place?”

the whale is single-use

That shift away from tidying up and towards not creating the mess at all is quietly subversive in a culture organised around consuming more. He knows it puts him at odds with the logic of growth.

He also knows the alternative.

He has watched the swimming holes from his childhood, rain-filled depressions in the land, fill up with picnic trash. He has seen hills between his home and his workplace cut down and filled. He talks about it without drama, but the fear is real.

“You never know which part of Goa is going to be destroyed next,” he says. “The hill near your house, the river you grew up next to. It’s changing so fast.”

Like anyone who works in sustainability, Jonah knows the odds are not in his favour.

He is aware of sinkholes in far-off countries, of drying rivers, of projections that half the world could face water scarcity within a decade. He knows that Goa features on lists of vulnerable regions. He knows that every sack he suns and every plastic bag he refuses exists alongside a world of private jets and fossil fuel.

Does he ever question the point of it all?

“I think it doesn’t matter,” he says, after a pause. “I think you just need to do the best with the time and

resources given to you.”

Burnout, when it comes, doesn’t arrive because a billionaire chartered a flight. It arrives when destruction is close enough to smell: a field being filled in, a canal blocked, a hill shaved down. On those days, it’s tempting to give in to the feeling that his work is a drop in a rising sea.

What brings him back are people.

“If you wake up and keep doing the work, you’re surrounded by fantastic, inspiring people,” he says. “By midday, you’ve met farmers, colleagues, customers. You remember all the good that’s happened, the people who rely on you. The farmers who are so happy when we turn up. That really shifts the mood.”

Sasha is another anchor. Her support has allowed him to choose a path that is not always easy to explain at a bank counter. When he talks about safety nets, he



speaks first about her.

There is also, underneath everything, a plain stubbornness.

In seven years, he has had enough reasons to walk away. He has watched a whole year's worth of energy and money go into an electric rickshaw mobile store experiment that didn't work. He has faced the same cash-flow worries that shadow most small, principled businesses. More than once, he has looked at friends in more conventional jobs and wondered, briefly, if he made a mistake.

Then the doubts subside.

"If I have a very serious conversation with myself, I don't see myself doing anything else," he says. "So even when times get tough, and I start to doubt, sooner or later I find my way back here."

But if he could change one thing in his past, he says, he would get more business and financial training from day one. Not to chase scale at any cost, but to make the work more resilient.

Jonah is clear about what he is not. He is not a fixer. He is not the only person doing this work. He is suspicious of any framing that suggests the world would fall apart if he stopped.

"If I say something would be lost to the world if I stopped, that feels very egotistical," he says. "We've been inspired by others; others are doing it now; others will come."

What he hopes is that his work can stand as proof of possibility.

He talks often about his grandparents' generation, when people took *dabbas* (tin boxes) to the shop for oil and grain, and kettles for milk. "We haven't invented this," he says of Zeroposro. "We're just bringing back how it was done just two generations ago."

If his story does anything, he would like it to show that you can build a life and a livelihood around that older sense of enough. That you can work closely with land and farmers, refuse certain kinds of convenience, be honest about your compromises, and still find happiness.



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