



The Mobile Vaani Vision for 2018 and Beyond: A Community Media for the Rural and Urban Poor

The Mobile Vaani agenda going forward

Mobile Vaani is a voice-based community media platform running in several rural districts of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh, and in urban industrial districts of Delhi NCR. Our target userbase is the rural and urban poor. Our mission is to provide them with a technology based community media platform that is easy to use and readily accessible to even poorly literate and low income populations, and with required train support to encourage them to leverage the platform for socio-economic development of their communities. Mobile Vaani users have benefited significantly from the platform over the years to gain awareness about local events and happenings, government schemes, agricultural best practices, career counseling, appropriate health and nutrition behavior, community demand for social accountability in government schemes and workplace entitlements, cultural expression, and community building and solidarity. Countless stories of impact have been recounted by our users on how the Mobile Vaani team and its volunteers have helped solve their grievances in the implementation of welfare schemes, employee entitlements, and public health and education services delivery. Our vision is that media owned and operated by the community can significantly empower the people to build a shared understanding of problems and solutions, and impose checks and balances on various stakeholders to ensure equitable development and better living standards for everybody.

Gram Vaani started the Mobile Vaani network in late 2012/early 2013 after some initial pilots, and has now grown the network to over 20 districts spread across rural and urban areas, with a monthly listenership of 50,000 unique users who call on average 5 times a month for an average call duration of 8 minutes per call. Over 300 stories of individual and community impact have resulted through the efforts of the Mobile Vaani team and their network of 200+ volunteers across their operating geographies. Mobile Vaani operations are sustained through grants by philanthropic donors and sponsorships by social sector organizations, with the remaining gap funded by Gram Vaani through profits earned by its technology and services business provided to the social sector.

We want to push the Mobile Vaani agenda along four directions over the next few years:

- Initiate in-depth discussions on economic policies under heavy debate on the national and state levels, to help the rural and urban Mobile Vaani users build a broader perspective of how the policies can impact their lives, and to give their feedback which can inform policy formulation
- Publish narratives based on these community centric discussions on the Mobile Vaani website, share them on social media, and work in collaboration with mainstream media outlets especially the new digital media outlets including The Wire, Scroll, News Laundry, Newslick, Money Control, and In the Field, to bring the perspective of the poor into mainstream view
- Experiment with crowd-funding for the above activities, and to support volunteers from the local Mobile Vaani communities to take up activities on behalf of their communities such as to provide assistance in grievance redressal on government schemes, private providers, and workplace entitlements
- Experiment with community funded models where the users themselves can support the platform through small membership fees and subscriptions for a community media that not only informs and educates, but also helps solve their problems, and make their voices heard to a global audience

With being able to pursue this agenda, we will be able to build a more informed citizenry that can improve the effectiveness of the democratic governance process, identify additional financial sustainability pathways for the platform, and work more strongly on using media to enforce accountability in government initiatives for citizen welfare and private regulations for employee welfare. Being able to build a more encompassing and shared understanding, we hope these efforts will also improve solidarity and provide an impetus for collective action to empower communities to find solutions to their problems.

Community needs

Our target community is the rural and urban poor, especially in the north Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi NCR, and Haryana. Governance institutions have largely failed these people, and they remain oppressed with poor socio-economic mobility despite rapid economic growth happening in the country¹. The administration of public welfare schemes and the delivery of health and education services in these states remains poor², with widespread malnutrition, poor quality of education, and a badly functioning public health system. Local industries have not grown rapidly³, and while heavy industries such as mining which do employ locals have kept pace with India's development, suppressed wages and widespread casualization of labour has resulted in considerable exploitation and resentment among the rural populations⁴. Agriculture is no longer able to absorb surplus employment⁵, and poor price realizations by farmers with the goal of keeping food inflation for the retail consumers low, has further eroded livelihoods through farming⁶. As a result, widespread migration happens to industrial centers such as Delhi NCR, but where workers are heavily exploited with poor wages due to a mass casualization of the workforce⁷. Even the living conditions of these workers is extremely bad, with poor sanitation in the colonies and exploitation by local landlords⁸. Due to a systematic weakening of the trade unions and constraints which prevent the unionization of casual workers, adequate checks cannot be imposed on the employers and contractors either, to provide social security benefits to the workers in a reliable manner⁹. Wages and working conditions in the non-agricultural informal sector which employs the bulk of the Indian workforce, and includes industries like construction, brick kilns, small garment units, domestic help, home based work in garments and beedi making, etc, are even weaker because of deficient regulations and which are also harder to impose in the informal setting¹⁰.

All these people have common needs, starting with better functioning of public services, to being able to get a fair wage without exploitation, get their due rights and entitlements, get policies working for them instead of against them, and lead a life of dignity for themselves and their families.

Unfortunately however, despite free elections at all levels – national/state/local – fulfilling these needs remains hard because of a complex mix of factors all of which stack up against the poor. Not being enough literate and aware, or empowered, they are often unable to directly approach government officials to resolve their grievances, be it related to NREGA wage delays or ration card problems in the villages¹¹, or PF/ESI and minimum wage problems in the cities¹². Agendas like improving the public health and education facilities are often sidelined in elections in favour of caste centric sops¹³, and local institutions are unable to hold officials accountable to ensure a good quality of service of facilities and schemes¹⁴. Furthermore, migrants from rural areas who settle in the cities for low paying jobs, lack a sense of community and solidarity to be able to stand up against poor working conditions and living conditions¹⁵, and neither are the weakening trade unions able to represent the workers to impose adequate checks and balances on the dominant neo-liberal approach in the modern Indian democracy^{16,17}.

As a result, despite a clear understanding of the community needs, the solutions remain elusive.

Our localities and current work

12 of the 14 most active districts in which we are working, are classified as backward districts by the government of India. Our core areas of operation include:

- Bihar

- o **Jamui:** Agriculture dominated economy, paddy, maize, onion, mahua. Some tourism (birthplace of Lord Mahavira). Flourishing beedi making industry involves women from low-income families. About 900 registered industrial units and 2500 total industrial units, in making utensils, iron grills, etc. No large industries.
Key blocks: Sikandra, Gidhaur, Jhajha, Chakai, Aliganj, Khaira, Simultala
- o **Munger:** Agriculture dominated economy. Over 1700 industrial units, 4000 total industrial units, 3 industrial areas, and 2 large units, in food processing, garments, furniture, metal fabrication, and repairing and servicing. Oldest railway manufacturing unit. ITC tobacco factory. Large local gun producing industry, well known, existed for the last two centuries.
Key blocks: Jamalpur, Bariyarpur, Kharagur, Tetiyabambar

- **Lakhisarai:** Agriculture dominated economy, paddy, wheat, maize, potato, onion. Large trading center, in Banarasi silk, silk, carpets, dari. 800 registered industrial units, 1800 total industrial units, 1 large unit, 1 industrial area, in iron rods, rice mills, sindur, insecticide manufacturing, soap manufacturing. Some dairy.
Key block: Brahiya
- **Nalanda:** Agriculture dominated economy, rice, potato, onion. Popular tourist destination, Nalanda University. Handloom weaving in cotton, dyeing. 3000 registered industrial units, 4500 total industrial units, 1 industrial area, in food processing, garments, furniture, leather, auto servicing and agricultural equipment.
Key blocks: Harnaut, Chandi, Nagarnausa, Hilsa, Ekangarsari, Islampur, Rajgir
- **Madhubani:** Agriculture dominated economy, paddy, pulses, sugarcane, makhana, mango. Some tourism due to archaeological relevance and handicrafts (Madhubani paintings). Two industrial areas, 1700 registered industrial units, in food processing, furniture, machinery and transport equipment, repairing and servicing. Makhana processing in eight clusters.
Key blocks: Lokaha, Ladaniya, Khajauli, Jainagar, Rajnagar, Babubarhi
- **Samastipur:** Agriculture dominated economy, paddy, maize, wheat, potatoes, litchi, mangoes, tobacco. Lotus flowers and fishery for income as well. 1600 registered industrial units, 2 large units, in sugar, paper, jute, food processing, furniture, metal works, repairing and servicing, railway wheels factory.
Key blocks: Sarairanjan, Morwa, Warishnagar
- **East Champaran:** Agriculture dominated industry, paddy, wheat, sugar cane, jute, lentils. Pearl button and fishery for income as well. 1500 registered industrial units, 1 industrial area, in food processing, metal works, furniture, chemical, repairing and servicing.
Key blocks: Dhaka, Patahi, Harsiddhi, Turkoliya
- **Jharkhand**
 - **Bokaro:** Large coal industry, ancillary industry in steel, cement, chemical, machine tools, engineering. 1500 registered industrial units, in garments, furniture, engineering and repair.
Key blocks: Chandankyari, Jaridih, Kasmar, Tetarwar, Gomiya, Bermo, Chndrapura, Nawadih
 - **Dhanbad:** Large coal industry. 2000 registered industrial units, 3000 total industrial units, 14 large units, 2 industrial areas, in garments, food processing, minerals, engineering, repairing and servicing.
Key blocks: Topchachi, Baghmara, Jhariya
 - **Hazaribagh:** Rich mineral deposits of limestone, quartz, coal, granite, sand. Forests are an important resource, covering 35% of the total land, and provide timber for furniture, mahua and other seeds for herbs. 1500 total registered industrial units, in furniture, mineral, rice mills, machine tools, and repairing and servicing.
Key blocks: Hazaribagh, Dari, Katkambad, Vishnugarh, Chrchu, Ichak, Barkagaon
- **Madhya Pradesh**
 - **Shibpuri:** Agriculture dominated economy, rice, maize, barley, wheat, jowar, sugarcane, pulses. 10000 registered industrial units, 1 large unit, in food processing, garments, furniture, paper products, leather, mineral, metal, engineering, repairing and servicing, herbal processing.
Key blocks: Pohri, Khaniyadana, Pichhor, Narwar, Kolaras, Shivpuri
 - **Chindwara:** Tourist spots, caves, forts, hot water spring. Heavily forested, bamboo, teak, tendu patta. Large coal deposits, manganese, magnesium. Problems of electricity, finance, market access.
Key blocks: Sausar
- **Delhi NCR**
 - **Kapashera:** Large concentration of garment factories
 - **Manesar:** Large concentrative of automotive industry

We started the Mobile Vaani voice-based community media platform in late 2012/early 2013 in Jharkhand, and it has now expanded to the above districts across 4 states. Each district runs its own Mobile Vaani club which dictates its own content and development agenda, with local volunteers who run the clubs according to a standard set of overarching organizational policies defined by Gram Vaani.



Mobile Vaani currently reaches out to 50,000 monthly unique users across these districts. The userbase is largely under 30 years of age (70% users), involved in agriculture either as smallhold farmers themselves or working as wage labourers in agriculture (50% users), with monthly household incomes reported by the majority as under Rs 5,000 (80% users). The services provided to the community through Mobile Vaani include the following:

- **Informational**
 - o Local news
 - o Awareness about government schemes in the public space and employment rights in the private space, eligibility, utilization, and problem resolution
 - o Livelihood based knowledge sharing in agriculture, career counseling, and job openings
 - o Discussions on social issues such as early marriage, domestic violence, gender empowerment
 - o Content on health and nutrition practices, especially for mothers and small children
 - o Discussions on policies and an understanding of how different policies affect people's lives
- **Strengthening of social accountability**
 - o Grievance redressal in public and private services at the individual level, facilitated by community volunteers and group solidarity
 - o Community based monitoring of local health and education facilities and schemes
 - o Transparency and awareness about the functioning of Gram Sabhas for stronger decentralization
- **Empowerment of individuals and the community**
 - o Recording and broadcast of self-experiences
 - o Solidarity and community building, through shared concerns and identities
 - o Trained cadre of community volunteers
- **Advocacy for institutional change**
 - o Outreach with a large partner network to draw attention to key gaps in the administrative and governance process, and suggest appropriate changes
 - o Pro-active engagement with government departments for improved functioning of government schemes
 - o Advocacy for appropriate policies and answerability of the political representatives towards the implementation of these policies

Mobile Vaani is not a one-size-fits-all community media platform, but an instantiation of local forums which are run by community volunteers who through their links with the local community are able to define relevant use-cases based on local needs, and then operationalize these use-cases with organizational support from Gram Vaani. It is thus a mix of standardized processes for content operations and community mobilization and technology support, which are instantiated locally and shaped contextually. Furthermore, the Mobile Vaani clubs and Gram Vaani support does not stop at just enabling communities to share information and knowledge, but goes further to facilitate development impact by helping communities leverage the local media setup to be able to impose checks and balances on various stakeholders, and aim to eventually even shape the emergent political dialogue as a result.

Through Mobile Vaani, we are equipping the people with more information about their rights and entitlements, how to access them, facilitate resolution by identifying and training volunteers from the community, and create dialogue within the government machinery to address systemic failures. Our goal is to empower people and communities to such an extent that they can demand and achieve resolution of local problems from government functionaries, private providers, political representatives, and other private/public stakeholders, and become aware enough to be able to question the politics and policies being put in place.

Our approach is characterized by a belief that an informed citizenry can define the direction in which it wants the country to progress. However, the road to realize this vision needs to be gentle. People need hand-holding to begin with because of which we nurture and train volunteers from the community itself, and the use of a two-way voice-based technology medium to communicate and engage with the people is used to reach even remote populations at a large scale and high speed. We believe that once more and more people become aware, and they are empowered through small successes, they will be able to utilize democratic institutions to be able to shape a world which is equitable and respectful of everybody.

Implementation plan

Operational details for the work done so far

Our theory of change is to help the community meet their needs by empowering them with giving them their own media, i.e. a media platform by and for the community. We do this through an innovative technology platform which uses IVR (Interactive Voice Response) systems accessible to even poorly literate populations through simple phones, through which they can listen to information and also with the press of a button, they can record their own messages they want to share with their community. These messages undergo a manual moderation and curation process before they are published on the IVR platform for other users to listen to them. The process effectively translates into a voice-based discussion forum for the community, where people can share and discuss different topics with each other through voice recordings¹⁸.

This medium supporting local production and consumption of content is called community media, a voice-based media for local communities who can use it as a source of information, as a platform for discussion and debate, and an accountability and transparency platform which can impose pressure on different stakeholders by virtue of the user generated content it carries and makes available publicly.

Over the years, we have run ground-up programmes on the sharing of local agricultural knowledge and job openings. We have run discussions on topics like rural-urban migration to unearth the reasons behind the relentless tide of migration, problems that migrant workers and their families face, and things to keep in mind for safe migration. We have intensively covered discussions on social issues such as early marriage and domestic violence, by encouraging people to discuss and debate the entrenched longevity of these norms. We have also covered in depth topics like maternal and child nutrition, sanitation, financial literacy, weather induced health hazards, and awareness and community action against vector borne diseases. People have appreciated these discussions because of the contextual relevance of the content which gets enriched by thoughts and information shared by the people themselves. Multiple partners have shared their expertise with us and supported us through grants and contracts, to run rich programmes on this wide diversity of topics, including organizations like PRADAN, JEEViKA, Population Foundation of India, Enable India, CREA, SEWA, Breakthrough, Oxfam, Digital Green, PACS, PLAN India, C3India, etc¹⁹.

We realized early on that easy to use and locally available technology, along with relevant content, are necessary but however not sufficient to drive the adoption of community media. Our target users being first time users of any automated information service, require training and demonstrations to be able to understand the usage of the platform. Furthermore, they require a demonstration of use-cases and examples to be able to understand how a technology driven community media platform can help them. Over the years, we have developed novel and low-cost methods to achieve this adoption by identifying and empowering volunteers from the local communities, who reach out to people to explain about the platform to them. The volunteers are organized into clubs at the district level, which helps create mutual accountability and bonding between the volunteers, to reduce attrition and improve solidarity. A novel mix of group and individual based financial incentives designed to help cover out-of-pocket expenses made by the volunteers towards their work with Mobile Vaani, works in tandem with the social incentives created by the platform to get participation from community volunteers²⁰.

This offline volunteer network is instrumental to achieve yet another objective through the community media platform, to impose social accountability on the local district governance structures. People call and record grievances on the platform, such as wage payment delays in rural NREGA works, or PF problems encountered in cities by factory wage workers, or entitlement issues like not having a ration card or unable to register themselves under old-age pension schemes. We train the volunteers to be able to take up these grievances to the relevant block and district officials, and put pressure on them for prompt redressal. We found that more than 50% of the grievances that our volunteers helped resolve, happened simply because we were keeping a watch on administrative inaction. Other tactics employed by the volunteers is to forward the recorded grievances to higher ranking government officials to escalate redressal, record interviews and a commitment to resolve the problems, and to also submit written petitions for community level issues endorsed by thousands of users on the platform. We have also used crowd-sourced data collection on the functioning of public health and education services to build performance reports based on community-based monitoring, which are taken up to the relevant officials to bring urgent attention to the issues. Over the years, we have helped resolve almost 300 grievances at the individual and community levels, to bring about improvements in the functioning of health facilities and mid-day-meal schemes, payment of weather related pending insurance claims for farmers, resolution of PF and ration problems, wage delays etc^{21, 22, 23, 24}.

The work planned going forward

We want to now push our work forward along four directions:

- **Greater coverage and discussion of policies under heavy debate**, to help outline how different policies tie together to affect people's lives. We want to help people understand especially patterns like:
 - Why growing inequality²⁵ is actually detrimental to economic growth, the very engine which propelled inequality in the first place²⁶. How people are experiencing inequality in their daily lives.
 - How progressive taxation can help reduce inequality and generate funds for wealth redistribution via welfare schemes and public funding of health and education, or even universal basic income²⁷
 - The fact that plenty of examples from across the country demonstrate that corruption and poor quality in the implementation of welfare schemes, can be plugged if political will and community demand exists; and that privatization is not the only alternative nor is it guaranteed to lead to better outcomes²⁸
 - Why migration to urban areas to work in low paying jobs in factories is not an easy route to economic mobility, and urgently needs to be made safer by guaranteeing the portability of welfare schemes and demand of political will to make it work²⁹
 - How export oriented manufacturing industries in India compete for low costs with industries in other countries, which has effectively resulted in a race to the bottom that has led to low worker wages in the Global South, and needs cross-country collaboration to achieve successes in the struggle for demand of better wages³⁰
 - How should government schemes be designed for implementation, to ensure that appropriate incentive structures exist in the ecosystem of different stakeholders to lead to an effective implementation³¹
 - What problems ail the agricultural economy – inadequate price support, irrigation and electricity infrastructure, exploitative market linkages by entrenched traders and debt networks, failed attempts at aggregating smallholder farmers, lack of capital for local food processing to move up the value chain, inflexibility of credit access networks to deal with weather related dependencies in agriculture, reduced size of landholdings, etc – and what should be the best way forward, even specific to different regions based on their respective local economy and context³²
 - How should jobs be created in India to pull out from the current jobless growth regime, and why people should demand better policies than resort to demands for reservation for different caste groups³³
 - Is the skills India programme really creating a high energy skilled workforce for the manufacturing and services industries, or is it just making it easier for these industries to replace older and more demanding workers with younger ones who are easily pliable and are not organized to be able to raise their voices³⁴
 - Are stronger regulations for informal enterprises the way to go, or an incessant drive towards formalization³⁵

Discussions on these highly debated topics will help people understand the larger landscape of economics and development. This should help people to be able to ask better questions and demand more appropriate policies from their political representatives, and create greater solidarity and a shared identity between them across seemingly artificial divides like rural/urban, class, caste, etc³⁶.

- **Publication of the discussions in public forums and media.** We want to engage with journalists who can summarize the discussions of people on these above topics, and publish their writings in mainstream media especially the new web-based news media sources. These writings will also be made available on an independent website for Mobile Vaani, and actively shared on social media. This will help make the needs of the rural and urban poor communities more publicly visible, along with their views on different policies. Given the little coverage that these matters get in the mainstream newspapers, our long term endeavor will be to reset the balance to bring attention to these issues in the mainstream³⁷.

As the tax paying population of India increases, this becomes even more important so that people are able to understand better how their tax money is being ploughed for development and redistribution, and to demand accountability for more effective utilization.

- **Crowd-funding to support community volunteers and discussion campaigns.** The volunteers trained and empowered through the platform are able to represent their community especially for grievance redressal follow-ups with government officials, and to help people register grievances with proper documentation and clarity. The volunteers however do this without any financial incentives, and in fact have to spend their own resources on fuel and other expenses to be able to visit various government offices. We want to experiment with a crowd-funded model where Internet users from the developed world, wealthy Indians, and professionals can choose and fund the activity of the volunteers for community development. This can include the following kinds of activities:
 - Build a list of all families in the village who should be registered as BPL (Below Poverty Line) to become eligible for appropriate ration card and other entitlements, and take this as a bulk request to the government officials after verification and corroboration by competent village authorities
 - Run crowd-sourced data collection campaigns to build indicators on the quality of care provided at local health facilities, or the quality of the mid-day meals in schools, and use this data to demand accountability and improved services. Leverage the Panchayati Raj Institutions to work with other departments and improve the quality of delivery of the services
 - Help farmers get paid their insurance claims from weather based crop destruction, which often get inordinately delayed and ultimately fail to meet the objectives for which they were designed, ie. reduce debt incidence among farmers and help them to maintain smoother cash flows
 - Ensure appropriate provisioning of civic amenities including roads, electricity, sanitation and cleanliness in both the villages as well as urban slums and dwellings
 - Follow-up on grievances and assist the people to register grievances with appropriate documentation, to improve the redressal rates by accelerating action in government departments

According to our estimate Rs 400 of assistance per volunteer per month, with a density of 2 volunteers per village, who can together handle up to 9-10 grievances per village per month, can help meet the basic expenses of volunteers to be able to at least remove monetary concerns in the commitment of volunteers towards offering their assistance³⁸. We have developed standard methods over the years to be able to identify volunteers and train them, to run these activities. We are working with UNDP to also advocate for institutionalization of this volunteer assisted model for improvement in the delivery of welfare schemes. In 2 panchayats in the Raipur district of Chattisgarh, we have formalized this model of recruiting volunteers with help from the Panchayat and ward members, who are being trained and given assignments such as the ones above, and being authorized representatives they are then able to register grievances and follow-up on the grievances on behalf of the beneficiaries. The district collector and other government officials are appreciating the model because it helps expand their own capacity to deliver services efficiently and keep a check on the quality of delivery, without an increase in their own workload. NIC Chattisgarh is our technical implementation partner and they are building a mobile app which can be used by the volunteers to keep monitoring the registered grievances from their community.

We also want to explore the potential of this volunteer driven route in exercising private sector accountability. Taking the example of privatization of healthcare stated earlier, our community driven data collection methods can be used to monitor the infrastructure and services delivered by public-private health facilities. We are working with the Population Foundation of India (PFI) and the National Foundation of India (NFI) in this direction in the states of Bihar, Chattisgarh, and Orissa, to train community reporters to provide regular data on the services, which is then collated and used by PFI and NFI to [initiate action by the health department](#) and [local political representatives](#). We also worked earlier with the PACS (Poorest Area Civil Society) programme to bring [accountability in the RSBY \(Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana\) health insurance scheme](#) which involved several private providers as well. In a similar way in the microfinance space, we are working with Sa-dhan, an SRO (Self Regulating Organization) mandated by RBI to ensure that MFIs are following the code of conduct, and we are helping Sa-dhan [capture voices of MFI consumers from across the Hindi belt](#) about their experiences with MFIs and to educate the borrowers about their rights and responsibilities. We also feel that the skilling India mission which among other things trains youth from rural areas and places them in factories in urban areas, can be used as a mechanism to enforce better working conditions and accountability at the workplace. A skills trainer, Gram Tarang, is using our platform to engage with

their trainees placed in different companies, and could help close feedback loops by conveying grievances to the employer and government stakeholders.

Additionally, campaigns on the various topics of discussion on policy and advocacy listed earlier, can also be supported through this crowd-funding route. Costs can be broken down by campaign, and multiple individuals can co-fund each campaign.

- **Community funding of media and development.** Due to the strong offline interventions in grievance redressal, people acknowledge our social credibility and have faith in our intentions. They also appreciate the content on the platform, which has led to a high retention of the order of 80% on a month on month basis. An open question we want to answer is whether people will be willing to pay small amounts for subscription to Mobile Vaani, in the range of Rs 20-30 per month. This can possibly also be justified through the added value of identifying and training volunteers who can facilitate offline grievance redressal to improve the living conditions of the overall community. Funding can be raised for other development activities as well, such as small local events to campaign against early marriage and domestic violence. Finally, this community funding will help bring greater ownership for Mobile Vaani among the local community, and lead to its sustainable deployment.

This agenda for the next phase of Mobile Vaani will not only help answer questions on sustainability and the limits of media to influence policy and politics, but also help build a template for community media in general. Our findings and experience will generalize beyond the specific technology channel we are currently using, of IVR systems, and will apply just as well to community radio, community video, and Internet based social media platforms. We are in parallel also developing a mobile application to build a digital migration pathway for Mobile Vaani users as people purchase smartphones and move to using data services.

We summarize this four-track agenda below, and attempt a classification of threats and opportunities for each one.

Work area	Objective	Threats and caveats	Opportunities
Coverage & discussion of policies under debate	People are better equipped to shape policy, avoid divisive alliances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listeners are short on time, or who want only instrumental info • Those who gain from limiting debate or channeling debate otherwise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those with pedagogical interest (public broadcasters, education system) • Aligned politicians, who want to be seen in a pro-poor/pro-worker light • Local industry CSR
Publication of discussions in the mainstream media	Reset the balance in mainstream media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those with interests in prioritizing other news! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream press who can't do such stories alone but would take them if easy • Parts of government who come out well!
Crowd funding to support community volunteers for grievance redressal and offline activities	Sustainable network of volunteers towards better governance, source of funding for discussion campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ineffective/ corrupt government offices, irresponsible employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlightened pro-reform officials higher up the bureaucracy • 'White collar' citizens who believe that good governance should be for all • Responsible officials and employers • Local industry CSR
Community based funding of community media	Sustainable subscription base for community media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwillingness to pay by listenership, used to freebees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile phone networks, co-branded with Mobile Vaani • Social media foundations • Listeners willingness to pay if results-oriented services are included (grievance redressal, training, jobs etc)





About us

Gram Vaani started its operations in January 2009, funded through a grant from the Knight Foundation to build a low-cost automation system for community radio stations. This first product called GRINS (Gramin Radio Inter Networking System) was very successful, and even today it powers 40+ community radio stations across the country. However, due to challenges of an upfront capex to set up community radio stations, and recurring operational costs for studio maintenance and content teams in remote areas where technical assistance is not easy to provide, the community radio ecosystem in India has not been able to grow rapidly. Consequently, Gram Vaani built its vAutomate IVR platform in 2011 to mimic the functionality of community radio but in an on-demand setting served off a cloud hosted infrastructure which made scaling straightforward. This solution has powered many exciting interventions run by a diverse set of social sector partners, across the health, education, agriculture, and financial literacy space. In 2012, Gram Vaani launched the Mobile Vaani service as an effort to go beyond the role of a technology provider, and directly provide community media services in rural areas. Mobile Vaani has been extremely successful, and also a rich source of learning for Gram Vaani and the broader community media ecosystem, in terms of novel processes for content development and field operations, to embed technology based interventions in the day to day life of communities. In 2015, Gram Vaani entered into a strategic partnership with the Life Impacting Services unit of OnMobile Global Ltd, and now operates as OnionDev Technologies Pvt Ltd as the holding company.

Over these years, Gram Vaani has worked with more than 150 partners who have used its technology and community media platforms, to produce countless stories of impact. We have won several national and international awards, including:

- Knight News Challenge, in 2008
- Manthan Juror's Distinction award, in 2009
- Economic Times Power of Ideas award, in 2010
- mBillionth awards, in 2012 and 2013
- Grand Challenges Canada Rising Stars in Global Health, in 2012
- Nasscom Social Innovation Challenge, in 2015
- Grand Challenges Canada Rising Stars in Global Health, in 2017

Our work has been covered under several case-studies:

- Dasra, Improving Governance in India, and Leveraging Mobiles for Governance
<https://www.dasra.org/cause/improving-governance-in-india>
<https://www.dasra.org/cause/leveraging-mobiles-for-governance>
- GSMA case study on Mobile Vaani
<https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/programme/connected-society/oniondevs-mobile-vaani-case-study>
- UNESCO-Pearson Initiative for Literacy: Case study on Mobile Vaani
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002588/258878e.pdf>

Some videos that will give a quick sense about our work:

- About Gram Vaani and our development approach:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcN53jWj1I>
- About Mobile Vaani, filmed by TimesNow for the Amazing Indians programme:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9FFt_iIqM

References and notes

¹ Anirudh Krishna, *The Broken Ladder*, 2017. Page 104 – adverse health events remain to be the largest factor because of which families fall into poverty. 60%-85% of households who fell into poverty in different states had one or more health episodes as important events in their history. Idleness, alcoholism, and drug addition, among family members in the household were not more than 5-7% of the reasons. Being able to provide a safety net to prevent families from falling back into poverty is just as important, as providing education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities to rise out of poverty. Over a 12 year period during the 1970s, studies showed that anywhere between 10-25% families escaped poverty but another 6-22% families fell back into poverty, resulting in an almost negligible net change.

² Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, 2013. Despite rapid economic growth, India has not been able to reduce poverty drastically and its development indicators remain among the lowest. 43% of children under 5 are underweight (rank 15 out of the 16 poorest countries of the world), 48% are stunted (rank 13 out of 16 poorest countries), the mean years of schooling is 4.4 (rank 11/16), infant mortality is 47 and under-5 mortality is 61 (rank 10/16). Much of this is also concentrated in the states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, and Rajasthan, followed by states like Assam, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Gujarat. Many reasons contribute towards this. India only spends 1.3% of its GDP on health, as compared to a global average of more than 4% of GDP. The administration and delivery of facilities and services is problematic because of broken accountability loops and a largely uneducated population base. Social norms against gender equality and caste/class based equality make it harder for especially marginalized groups to gain access to services and schemes. Problematic design of many government schemes in an effort to achieve higher targeting of beneficiaries have instead led to the exclusion of deserving beneficiaries.

³ Anirudh Krishna, *The Broken Ladder*, 2017. Page 87 – the need for decentralized networks of production and innovation, instead of centralized industrialization in a few urban centres only. Spatial inequality of industry location is in fact argued by many researchers as being the cause of spatial income inequality itself. History, national resources, human capital, local political economy, and culture, are all known to be contributory factors and areas which have favourable factors lined up are able to attract new industries more easily.

Dipak Mazumdar, *Employment and Inequality Outcomes in India*, 2010. India is also known to have an interesting “missing middle” problem in the distribution of the size of its manufacturing units – the bulk of the employment is provided in units with 500+ workers or in units with less than 10 workers. There are very few units with more than 10 workers to less than 500 workers, and is the industry’s response to labour laws which mandate several provisions in units with more than 10 workers. Employers have preferred to expand horizontally by setting up more and more small units, than integrate into single large units. This also has an effect on inequality because it reduces the workers’ motivation for skills formation – large units tend to employ highly skilled workers who can use automated machines, and are hence out of the league for ordinary workers; whereas the small units employ unskilled workers, and there is little to be gained from building further skills.

<http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/45282802.pdf>

⁴ Sanhati, *Overview of Coal Mining in India: Investigative Report from Dhanbad Coal Fields*, 2011. The number of permanent workers at CIL (Coal India Limited) has steady dropped from 700,000 in 1981 to less than 350,000 now. No casual worker has been made permanent since 1990, only the kin of permanent workers who died or suffered significant injuries at work have been given jobs. A casual worker is now paid less than 10% the wages of a permanent worker, for the same kind work.

<http://sanhati.com/excerpted/3798/>

⁵ NCEUS, *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganized Sector*, 2007. Page 126 – based on NSSO 2006, unemployment of rural agricultural workers has risen from 9% in the 1990s to more than 16% in 2006.

http://nceuis.nic.in/condition_of_workers_sep_2007.pdf

⁶ Kirankumar Vissa, *How Long Can India’s Farmers Subsidise the Nation*, 2017. Despite MSPs and various forms of electricity and fertilizer subsidies, farmers barely get a margin of 2-4% on their crop production. This has made their life incredibly difficult. Agricultural income is seasonal which makes it hard for farmers to maintain cash flows. Furthermore, the nature of agricultural production requires upfront investment for cropping and sees incomes only in bulk at the time of harvesting. This invariably requires farmers to raise debt, and any vagaries in the weather can significantly impact their ability to repay the debt and meet expenses.

<https://thewire.in/198485/farmers-protests-kisan-ki-loot-msp-fair-price/>

⁷ Financial Times, *Is Contract Labour the Problem or the Solution*, 2012. A high level debate on need for casualization to meet seasonal changes in the employment need of manufacturing industries, versus exploitation by manufacturers. More than 55% of the workforce in the organized sector is on contract. Furthermore, the organized sector itself only employs 7% of the workforce in India. <http://cii.in/WebCMS/Upload/FE,%20CB-%2027%20july%202012.pdf>

⁸ Gurgaon Workers News, *Proletarian Photo Story on Kapas Hera: A Working Class Dormitory Shanty-Town in Gurgaon*, 2010. Over 3,00,000 workers and families reside at Kapas Hera, out of which hardly 20,000 vote locally on civic matters. The original residents of Kapas Hera, ex-peasant families who own the land, now live in family houses and extract rental income from the workers. The workers who are mostly migrants from Bihar, are not permitted to procure food and grains from the designated PDS shops, and can only buy from the local merchants who are family members of the same peasant landlords, and control the living conditions of the local workers. <https://gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com/gurgaonworkersnews-no-927/>

Thomas Cowan, *Fragmented Citizenship in Gurgaon*, EPW 2015. Several neighbourhoods of Gurgaon are described including Kapashera and Chakkarpur, and how local farmers were enriched through sale of their land for construction, and used this income to build rental accommodation for migrants, but have managed to consistently avoid a headcount survey of their areas to avoid *Biharis* from getting elected as councillors. The migrants have reconciled themselves to leading a precarious life of exploitation, with no time to reflect on their collective state to question their rights as citizens. Middleclass and gated residential communities of professionals are also described, for whom public infrastructure provisioning has been extremely poor, and they have effectively become consumers of goods and services of global capital.

⁹ Immanuel Ness, *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class*, 2016. Page 86 – State Support for Indian Business, and the Decline of Unions. The Maruti incidences of 2000-2001 and then in 2011-13 are a startling example of the state working together with big capital to control labour unrest.

During the 2000-2001 period, the union representing workers at the Maruti Gurgaon plant protested for higher wages and resorted to tool-downs to make themselves heard, but Maruti managed to convince the state government about the illegality of these actions and resorted to a lockout until the workers agreed to a wage increase much lesser than what they had demanded. Further, the striking workers were penalized by cutting their wages for both the tool-down and the lockout periods. This succeeded in suppressing the ability of the union in collective bargaining.

Maruti later opened a new plant in Manesar where they resorted to a heavy use of contract labour. This helped the company keep their wage expenses low by resorting to rapid rotation of the contract workers to minimize their compliances, and also keep the permanent workers in check by not growing their number at the threat of increasing the extent of casualization. The contract and permanent workers realized therefore that they needed to work together, but their efforts at registering a union were denied because again Maruti managed to convince the state government that they already recognized the regular union and the same workers could not be a part of multiple unions. Maruti then resorted to the same techniques as earlier of a lockdown and fetching replacement workers, including some from their Gurgaon plant, to keep up the production. The workers eventually gave in, but protests again started when Maruti refused to allow the contract workers who had participated in the protest to continue working at the factory. They were eventually reinstated but the company forced several union functionaries to take a voluntary retirement. After this setback, the workers eventually in 2012 managed to get a union registered which also included the contract workers, but Maruti refused to negotiate with the union. Relations worsened with an altercation in the factory, after which Maruti brought in bouncers to keep discipline in the factory, and incidences of violence soon broke out which resulted in the death of an HR manager. This let loose the entire force of the state, police, and the company, with over 500 workers being issued arrest warrants, 150 of whom are still behind bars. The Gurgaon police has supplied a dedicated regiment of 500 officers now permanently stationed in the area to maintain security.

¹⁰ Minimum wage, working conditions, and social security protection for informal sector workers is very poor and fragmented across different employment segments. Problems arise right from the identification of workers where only some segments like for domestic workers in urban areas, or street vendors, has seen action in recognizing workers through identity cards, to mechanisms to give social security protection through welfare boards where the debate continues on ways to raise funds either through a cess on the industry or the entire population. <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Sankaran-Legal-Policy-Tools-Workers-India-WIEGO-LB1.pdf>

Migration, no proof of work, poor awareness, etc are usual problems due to which even available welfare funds for building and construction workers has in fact gone unutilized, and arguably spent wastefully.

<https://www.thequint.com/news/india/labour-welfare-money-remains-unspent>
<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/rs-29000-crore-fund-meant-for-construction-workers-spent-on-buying-laptops-revealed/303946>

Initiatives to give a universal identity card (UWin) to informal sector workers has also gotten somewhat derailed because of an insistence to now only use Aadhar.

<http://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/pmos-no-to-smart-cards-insists-on-aadhaar/article8455652.ece>
<https://www.thequint.com/voices/blogs/aadhaar-link-boost-informal-labour-market>

¹¹ Dipanjan Chakraborty, et al, *Findings from a Civil Society Mediated and Technology Assisted Grievance Redressal Model in Rural India*, In Proc. ICTD 2017. Section 3.1 – Feedback on government grievance redressal helplines. Section 3.2 – Offline civil society systems. Only 50% of people who faced problems with government schemes, used helplines and other redressal channels. About 50% of them had their problems redressed, but only 10% of this redressal happened through helplines – the remaining 90% of the redressals required help from social workers, or an in-person visit to the block or district officer.
<http://www.cse.iitd.ernet.in/%7Easeth/civilsocietygrievanceredressal.pdf>

¹² Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar, *Minimum Wage: The Real, The Legal, The Actual*, 2016. Despite over time, the wages being paid across factories in Delhi NCR in automotives, leather, garments, textiles, electronics, chemicals, and to security guards, are less than the legal minimum wage.
<http://tnlabour.in/automobile-industry/3834>

Our own work in Delhi NCR has revealed several problems like workers not being given payslips or any proof of employment of any kind, which they can use to trace their PF deposits. Employers often do not cooperate to sign forms for withdrawal of PF, especially if the workers leave the job in a few months, and for which a significant reason is simply the workers getting paid low wages, not getting paid for overtime, and poor working and living conditions, which force them to try and find better places to work or possibly even give-up and head back to their villages. Several worker stories from the Gurgaon area are also available here:

<https://gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com/gurgaonworkersnews-no8/>

¹³ Devesh Kapur, et al, *Sisyphian State? Why Poverty Programs in India Fail and Yet Persist*, In America Political Science Association, 2007. Government schemes are designed cleverly at the local level to build vote banks and for private transfer of wealth, while general public welfare schemes are ignored. The people themselves are not aware of the provisions under these general schemes, and with no strong historical precedents of success either, the people expect little political credibility in any case to demand accountability. <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/sites/casi.sas.upenn.edu/files/iit/Kapur%20et%20al.pdf>

K P Kannan, *Corporate Capitalism in the Name of Social Security*, EPW 2015. Even central schemes are argued as favouring corporate capitalism, such as in the insurance space, or an encouragement to people to move their investment from the EPF (Employee Provident Fund) which is invested primarily in government securities and debt instruments, to the NPS (National Pension Scheme) which is invested in the equity markets.

<http://www.im4change.org/siteadmin/tinyMCE//uploaded/KP%20Kannan.pdf>

¹⁴ Decentralization of various local government functions has long been argued as the way forward for context dependent delivery of services and governance. However, the lack of skills among elected representatives at the panchayat level has been a deterrent and no state other than Kerala has advanced enough on these lines. An intermediate solution suggested especially in the health context has been to leverage the Panchayati Raj Institutions to monitor the performance of service delivery, even if the actual implementation and finances remain under centralized control at the district or block level or within different government departments. Although various mechanisms have been proposed towards this, such as the constitution of Village Health Committees and to use the Gram Sabhas to exercise this role of oversight, but the implementation has remained weak so far.

The World Bank report outlines the need for this intermediate route, and the [NRHM document](#) discusses this in more detail.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/108011468042305807/pdf/369641SDP9801web.pdf>

NRLM as well highlights the role that the PRIs can play in beneficiary identification.
http://www.nird.org.in/nird_docs/nrlm/nrlmhandbookconvergence050716.pdf

However, the implementation remains weak, as evidenced in the report on the poor functioning of the Village Health and Nutrition Days:

http://cks.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/VHSND_Labnote.pdf

¹⁵ Shankar Ramaswami, *Towards Autonomous Transformations: Themes and Activities of a Radical Proletarian Newspaper in North India*, Published in Asharani Mathur ed, *The Indian Media: Illusion, Delusion and Reality*, 2006. FMS believes in workers gaining a collective consciousness and an ability to work together which it calls *talmel*, and accordingly gears its editorials and poetic narrations that reflect the lives of the workers, working conditions in factories, self-imposed disempowerment by the workers themselves when they choose to sit on the sidelines as “spectators to their own slaughter”, divisive techniques adopted by them to compete with each other which ultimately leads to greater exploitation, the *tamasha-giri* of news, and other contradictions that form the lives of workers.

¹⁶ Siddharth Varadarajan, *The Crisis of the Indian Workplace*, India Seminar, 2015. There is deepening influence of the corporate sector on policy formulation especially on environmental norms and labour reform. The control is exercised through political funding which remains non-transparent, and through lobbying networks of large industry associations.

http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/669/669_siddharth_varadarajan.htm

<https://svaradarajan.com/2014/03/27/the-cult-of-cronyism/>

The introduction of electoral bonds makes it even easier for companies to contribute anonymously to political parties, and can make it harder for opposition parties to raise funds.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-danger-of-electoral-bonds/article20602008.ece>

¹⁷ Law is designed in a way to make it even harder for workers to protest, the laws for trade unions being a case in point. Extra-legal mechanisms are therefore often used to build social movements and militancy, to get things done. Ambedkar's *educate-organize-agitate* method seems to be getting more common now, according to Colin Gonsalves, the founder of HRLN, who despite being an advocate himself strongly believes that law is oppressive and that social movements that enable people to take the law in their own hands are the only way forward.

<https://barandbench.com/colin-gonsalves-interview-part-1/>

¹⁸ Aparna Moitra, et al, *Design Lessons from Creating a Mobile-based Community Media Platform in Rural India*, In ICTD 2016. The paper captures various operational details of content moderation, editorial policies, community mobilization, and impact pathways in the Mobile Vaani network in rural Jharkhand and Bihar. A historical view is provided about how the latest processes came into being through a continuous process of iteration.

http://www.cse.iitd.ernet.in/%7Easeth/ICTD_Paper_Draft_V10_Complete.pdf

¹⁹ Several blogs on Mobile Vaani activities are here: <http://www.gramvaani.org/?cat=14>

Campaign reports (not updated with more recent campaigns) are here: http://www.gramvaani.org/?page_id=830

Our programmes on health and nutrition practices have regularly brought about a 10-25% increase in accurate awareness of the topics. Our discussion campaigns on social norms and community behavior have been appreciated significantly with several testimonials suggesting that these discussions on Mobile Vaani are important because the community otherwise does not talk about such topics, and listening to the stories of change of others inspires the people to take positive steps themselves.

²⁰ Aparna Moitra, et al. *An Analysis of Community Mobilization Strategies of a Voice-based Community Media Platform in Rural India*, Under review. Contact aseth@gramvaani.org for a pre-read. The paper describes how social incentives and monetary incentives are reconciled in an innovative volunteer club structure that nurtures mutual accountability and group performance, yet rewards on exemplary individual performance.

²¹ Impact stories: <http://www.gramvaani.org/?cat=12>. These include the release of almost 2cr of long pending insurance payouts in Bokaro, a movement to maintain migrant worker registers in villages in Jharkhand, release of PDS rations in a shop in the Ratlam-Madsour district of Madhya Pradesh, suspension of a block development officer in Koderma after publication of reports about illicit land dealings, arrest of people selling illegal alcohol in Koderma, refund of inappropriately charged fees by a school headmaster in the Giridih district of Jharkhand, and many more.

S. Vivek, *Delivering Public Services Effectively: Tamil Nadu and Beyond*, 2014. Decentralized collective action in Tamil Nadu led by local village youth and leaders in independent pockets, in a history of social movements rooted in the empowerment

of marginalized groups in the state, is argued to be the key driver for better provisioning of public services in Tamil Nadu as compared to other states in India. Mobile Vaani's offline volunteer network follows the same principle of nurturing collective action and mentorship of the community to resolve its issues by holding local institutions accountable for their work.

²² Dipanjan Chakraborty, et al, *Findings from a Civil Society Mediated and Technology Assisted Grievance Redressal Model in Rural India*, In Proc. ICTD 2017. Table 3 – Summary of resolved grievances. Almost 50% of resolved grievances had been pending only due to administrative inaction. <http://www.cse.iitd.ernet.in/%7Easeth/civilsocietygrievanceredressal.pdf>

²³ Dipanjan Chakraborty, et al, *Building Citizen Engagement into the Implementation of Welfare Schemes in Rural India*. In Proc. ICTD 2015. Significant gains were shown from being able to obtain data reported by the service providers and verify it by the citizens. Simple technology can also be used to obtain feedback from the citizens about the implementation and problems faced in the functioning of government schemes.

²⁴ Aaditeshwar Seth, et al, *Application of Mobile Phones and Social Media to Improve Grievance Redressal in Public Services*, In M4D Web Foundation Workshop, 2012. Three case-studies outlining how public citizen reported data can be used to demand accountability. These included techniques to escalate unresolved complaints to higher up government officials to accelerate action, publication of grievances and data in the public domain and in regional newspapers to put pressure on the providers to improve the quality of delivery of services, and a comparison of provider reported data with citizen reported data with the option of allowing the citizens to dispute the data. <http://www.cse.iitd.ernet.in/%7Easeth/m4dpositionpaper.pdf>

²⁵ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, 2014. The top 1% of income earners in India capture 22% of the total income annually, and now possess almost 50% of the overall wealth in the country. Global wealth inequality is of the same order too. Piketty's argument about the wealth accumulation process is that inequality will continue to increase until the rate of return on capital (r) remains greater than the rate of economic growth (g). This is intuitively straightforward to understand. Any economic output will have capital (assets like land, machines, technology, finance) and labour as inputs, and will have some distribution of the income given to capital and labour. Any growth in output can be distributed among capital and labour as well, potentially such as that the ratio of capital to labour does not change, but if the distribution is more skewed towards capital (ie. return on capital is more than the growth rate) then the owners of capital will continue to increase their share of the income at the cost of the owners of labour. This will lead to a rise in wealth inequality, which is essentially savings from income accumulated over time. Therefore, not only the capital to labour split in income needs to be questioned, but if the return on capital remains higher than the growth rate, then inequality will only continue to worsen. It was only briefly during the World Wars when a lot of wealth got destroyed, that the wealth share of the top 10% came down, and subsequently due to a high growth rate after the wars then briefly the growth rate exceeded the rate of return on capital and the poor were able to increase their share of wealth. However, in the recent years due to a slowdown in the growth rate, and increase in income inequality, the wealth share of the rich has attained the same levels of inequality that persisted in the 18th century.

Other statistics only make the entire scenario look even bleaker. The labour intensity in production has decreased due to increasing automation which has led to an increase in overall labour productivity due to the need for more skilled labour, but it has not been accompanied by an increase in wage rates.

<http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/Vxmd5HHO8qeLuqYUioobbpM/Higher-productivity-equals-higher-wages-Not-for-the-Indian.html>

This is due to an increasing casualization of labour which has helped keep the wages low. Further, the gap in wages of skilled and unskilled workers has only increased, also evidenced with a growing gap in the CEO to median worker salary ratios.

http://icrier.org/pdf/Working_Paper_313.pdf

Piketty's solution of progressive taxation however is not being discussed actively in policy circles, and in fact personal income tax rates have been on the decline since the past many decades, and India's personal income tax collections as a fraction of its GDP remain among the lowest in the world.

<https://thewire.in/179252/indias-billionaire-raj-era-time-reform-personal-income-tax/>

This rise in inequality and increasing wealth in the hands of a few has in fact led to an increasing incidence of crony capitalism and resistance to policy changes.

<https://scroll.in/article/812373/25-years-after-liberalisation-india-must-realise-that-wealth-isnt-development-unless-it-is-shared>

The use of tax havens have been on the rise, and require international cooperation of finance networks to uncover wilful tax evasion.

<https://www.somo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2007/01/The-Case-of-the-Netherlands.pdf>

²⁶ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality*, 2012. A strong argument is put forth about the perils of increasing inequality, which reduces economic output by eroding the purchasing power of the population, increases class-based polarization, makes rent seeking easier, and reduces the redistributive capability of the government.

Angus Deaton and Jean Dreze, *Poverty and Inequality in India: A Re-examination*, EPW 2002. The conventional view from economics has been that inequality and growth are in a trade-off: Better growth requires inequality, at least in short term, according to Kuznets to reward performance and create incentives. There is however growing evidence of the ills of inequality even if people fare better on an absolute poverty line, and that inequality directly dampens growth's effect on not just relative but absolute poverty.

https://www.princeton.edu/rpds/papers/pdfs/deaton_dreze_poverty_india.pdf

This article also presents a similar economic argument: <https://medium.com/basic-income/trickle-down-economics-must-die-long-live-grow-up-economics-5b8334a0db76>

²⁷ Pranab Bardhan, *How India can do UBI: Universal Basic Income is a Practical Solution to Poverty and Inequality*, 2017. A reduction in non-merit subsidies and revenue foregone through tax concessions to companies, moving away from zero taxation of long term capital gains and inheritance tax, and progressive taxation to increase the tax to GDP ratio, can easily provide the necessary extra revenues to implement a universal basic income policy in India.

<https://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-edit-page/how-india-can-do-ubi-universal-basic-income-is-a-practical-solution-to-poverty-and-inequality/>

²⁸ Jean Dreze, *Sense and Solidarity*, 2017. Page 187 – The PDS Turnaround in Chattisgarh, with Reetika Khera. The Chattisgarh government put Gram Panchayats, Self Help Groups, Van Suraksha Samitis, and other community institutions in charge of the ration shops. This was followed by a change in the delivery process, to deliver the grains to the ration shops rather than have the dealers fetch them from the godowns, which helped make diversion of grains much harder. Technology was also used to track the movement of delivery vehicles, and trigger SMS alerts to interested citizens informing them about the delivery. This example illustrates that with the right political will, and the creation of appropriate processes to counter undesirable local dynamics that may have developed, corruption in the delivery of welfare schemes can be substantially reduced and even eliminated.

Straightforward privatization may not always yield results. The Rajasthan experiment of privatizing healthcare has not worked very well so far, and is marred by less transparency, poor grievance redressal processes, and a focus on only curative healthcare at the cost of ignoring preventive health care.

<https://scroll.in/pulse/856325/ground-report-rajsthans-privatisation-experiment-for-public-healthcare-is-sputtering>

In our view, the problem with privatization is that the only forces to keep it in check are competition and regulation. Competition however in health privatization may be infeasible because the government is likely to operate in a PPP model with exclusive licenses given to a single provider within a given geography. Regulation too is hard for governments to exercise, with the possibilities of fudged data, broken auditing processes, negligible amounts of fine, etc. Finally, consumer empowerment too is limited which is why people need assistance from social workers and volunteers for grievance redressal, and in a private setting being able to secure this assistance may become harder. Therefore, privatization needs to be designed very carefully in public services. This view was also echoed by the NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman Dr Rajiv Kumar:

<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/niti-aayog-vice-chairman-rajiv-kumar-we-are-falling-very-short-on-aspirations-public-facilities-private-sector-promises-universal-health-insurance-4954650/>

²⁹ A minimum landholding of 2 acres is needed to just feed a family of 5 members, leave aside other expenses, but 75% of the landholdings are less than 1 acre in India. With reduced size of landholdings and poor margins in agricultural production, agriculture alone is not able to provide sufficient income for farmer families in rural areas. Initiatives like MGNREGA help but are not sufficient, and therefore rural-urban migration rather than being inspired by an ambition for upward social and economic mobility, has become a last resort for families to make their ends meet. According to estimates, anywhere between 80M to 150M people move from villages to cities each year, but 90% of whom return to their villages after working for a few days or months in the cities. Most find employment in the construction sector, followed by industrial employment,

and some as rickshaw pullers and labourers. In the cities however, they are forced to live in extremely poor conditions. Not having a local address, they are unable to utilize PDS shops or get an LPG connection. Room rentals are expensive, and hygiene and sanitation conditions are extremely poor. Especially when the men are accompanied by their families, there is little support to be able to utilize Anganwadis or schools for their children, or crèches if the wife too are working as labourers or domestic help. Only migrants who are long settled in the cities and find employment in factories, have health cards and are able to utilize ESI.

<http://sldindia.org/exploring-rural-urban-dynamics-a-study-of-inter-state-migrants-in-gurgaon/>

Rural to rural migration is an even bigger component than rural to urban migration. Work at brick kilns or sharecropping agreements or agricultural labour in other farms are common employment options, but ridden with similar issues of not being able to access PDS grains, health facilities, and having to live in poor housing and shelter conditions. Several reports from the Aajeevika Bureau are very insightful:

<http://www.aajeevika.org/research-and-publication.php>

Aadhar based access to entitlements and services can help, but provided Aadhar itself is implemented appropriately tuned to the context of the poor and uneducated, which sadly has not been a priority of the implementers so far.

³⁰ Globalization has helped relocate manufacturing across national borders which has helped generate employment in the Global South, but the same drivers of inequality persist along these trans-national value chains as well. In the garment sector, only 1% of the value of the end-product sold to consumers is the wage share of workers in developing countries. Of the profit, more than 50% is retained by the retailers, 25% by the brands, 13% by the manufacturers mostly in developing countries, and 11% by the transporters. The struggle for higher wages thus needs to go beyond the shopfloor, and question the globalized networks of production which continue to impose pressure on keeping manufacturing costs low by the threat of relocating production to cheaper and cheaper countries. This has effectively led to a race to the bottom with wages being the component that gets impacted the most, along with increasing the capital intensity in production.

<http://cwm.org.in/exchains-building-solidarity-along-the-global-garment-supply-chain/>

Brands taking up a commitment to ensure better wages across their supply chain is a promising way forward:

<https://fashionunited.in/news/business/will-h-m-fulfill-its-pledge-by-paying-a-fair-living-wage-by-2018/2017112716230>

³¹ Our hypothesis is that welfare schemes should be designed keeping in mind that the target beneficiaries are not literate or aware enough, or even sufficiently empowered, to be able to demand redressal for their grievances. They need help from social workers and volunteers to help register grievances and negotiate for prompt redressal. Greater use of centralized technology like the Aadhar system makes it harder for them to seek help, a classic example being several de-registrations of ration cards and old age pensions that have happened due to the people not being able to link their Aadhar with identifiers for different government schemes due to problems like spelling mistakes in their names or problems in the technology and communication networks, and where even helpful social workers and offline networks of civil society organizations are not able to intervene.

Jean Dreze, *Aadhar or else*, Indian Express, 2017.

<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/aadhaar-biometric-authentication-abba-public-distribution-system-pds-jharkhand-4946834/>

³² There are many sources that describe the wide range of problems faced by the agricultural industry in India, including the reduced size of landholdings, high prices of better quality seeds, improper knowledge and availability of soil nutrition and crop protection solutions, poor irrigation networks, need for greater mechanization to increase yields and reduce costs, soil erosion, market linkages, inadequate storage facilities, road infrastructure, and access to capital.

<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/agriculture/10-major-agricultural-problems-of-india-and-their-possible-solutions/20988>

A contradictory position is also that agricultural growth has indeed been good, with price realizations for farmers having improved, wages having increased at a rate more than inflation, and an increase in the production of different crops. However, the lack of research in increasing yields and a slowing down of overall economic growth, are cited as concerns that could reverse the trend of improvements in agriculture. The article does not talk about employment in agriculture though, which may present a different picture because due to reduced landholdings it is becoming harder and harder for families to sustain themselves on agricultural income alone.

http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/641/641_harish_damodaran.htm

³³ Job growth has slowed down, and is reportedly negative in several sectors such as textiles and even possibly IT. Some of this is because of recent shocks including demonetization and GST, but much of it is argued to be structural with an increase in capital intensity in manufacturing, lack of capital for MSMEs where the labour intensity is higher, poor growth in the agricultural sector which is the largest employer, and persistent low wages and rising inequality which suppresses domestic consumption and consequently the confidence for private investment to expand capacity and increase output.

<http://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/jobless-growth-even-if-labour-data-is-wrong-it-cannot-hide-the-fact-that-indian-economy-is-now-more-capital-intensive/767498/>

Solutions like easier credit access to MSMEs, promotion of more labour intensive sectors such as food processing, rural infrastructure such as cold chains and storage to boost agriculture, and the promotion of non-manufacturing jobs especially in health and education which remain neglected areas, are promising directions. In fact, the services sector has been the main employment driver so far, and given the poor delivery of health, education, judicial, etc services, investments made in skilling and scaling this public services sector can help general not just employment but also improve overall social welfare.

<https://thewire.in/82017/india-abysmal-job-creation-record/>

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/the-worlds-health-sector-is-expanding-but-will-it-heal-our-economies/>

Even radical solutions like [subsidizing employers to create employment](#), rather than subsidize employers through lower taxes, are interesting directions being proposed. [Bill Gates even proposed a robot tax](#) for employers who replace humans with robots to do the same job.

The fact that creating jobs is important is highlighted by the increase in demands for quotas in jobs through violent agitations, even by higher caste groups.

<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/quotas-reservation-jobs-patidar-maratha-jat-agitation-4456247/>

³⁴ Orlanda Ruthven, *How to Skill India When the Jobs are Bad*, 2017. The government pays social enterprises to train young boys and girls in rural areas in vocational skills. These enterprises then help place their trainees with companies across the country, but reports suggest that companies rely on this route to replace older workers especially those who would be organizing in unions to demand better wages and entitlements. Being able to replace older workers with a younger workforce that has arrived fresh from villages, makes it easier for the companies to continue their exploitative practices. These young arrivals are also shown as trainees who earn lower wages, which makes it easier for companies to keep their costs low in a legitimate manner. Even higher skilled *white collar* roles like in the automotives or electronics sector, face the same challenges, while companies use freebies and segregate them from *blue collar* workers to make them feel superior and avoid a “labour mentality”.

<https://thewire.in/175882/skill-india-narendra-modi-jobs-in-india-unemployment/>

³⁵ Pointing out problems that women face in the informal sector such as lower wages than their male counterparts and even sexual harassment, formalization is argued as being a route for gender empowerment because of its stronger regulatory framework and compliance.

<http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/L6x5UGBL04e736FYCIHWZO/Empowering-women-through-job-creation.html>

However, the track record of the formal sector in complying with regulations is not stellar either, over and above problems in the regulatory framework itself which hampers collective bargaining and organization. Labour law violations of working conditions are frequent, as evidenced in plenty of news reports.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/labour-law-violation-15-firms-face-criminal-cases/article4785262.ece>

<http://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/240716/ramachandran-textiles-flouting-labour-norms-too.html>

K R Shyam Sundar, *The Myth of the Inspector-Raj in India*, EPW 2014. The industry has further been lobbying for relaxation in factory inspections, but the data shows that inspection has already been liberalized to a significant extent yet workplace safety has only worsened.

<http://www.epw.in/node/130163/pdf>

<https://thewire.in/194379/ntpc-accident-points-wider-need-document-reduce-workplace-mishaps/>

The GST and demonetization driven push for formalization has also differentially impacted different manufacturing sectors. Engineering goods and petroleum products which are capital intensive and manufactured by large corporate players have largely been unscathed, but labour dominated sectors like garments, leather, gems and jewellery, etc, even if they might be integrated into global production value chains, have had a high incidence of workers engaged through informal channels and have suffered in the process. With an increase in expenses and working capital, and absence of capital availability, many of

these enterprises now actually face a threat of closure. Clearly, shock treatment approaches to fix the economy are fraught with collateral damage, often tilted in favour of established players.

<https://thewire.in/201397/indias-merchandise-exports-limp-along-even-global-trade-picks/>

³⁶ Immanuel Ness makes a strong argument for solidarity between permanent workers and contract workers to begin with, to be able to bargain for higher wages. This solidarity however will need to extend across national boundaries however, especially in the Global South, where conditions of worker exploitation are similar and are exacerbated by globalized production networks that seek the lowest costs of production. Efforts like the Asia Floor Wage in the garment sector which argue for a living wage across countries, are working towards this goal.

<https://thewire.in/60094/trade-unions-working-class-in-india-immanuel-ness/>

<https://asia.floorwage.org/>

³⁷ P. Sainath, *To Indian Media, 75% of the Population Does Not Matter*, Coverage of a seminar on Social Media in the Newsroom, by Your Story, 2017. CMS found that coverage of agriculture reporting in the Indian national dailies was only 0.67% and of village level stories only 0.17%.

<https://yourstory.com/2017/06/p-sainath-indian-media/>

The coverage of labour issues has similarly dropped considerably in the media, and this can be argued allegedly as being due to an increasing corporate control over the media.

<https://thewire.in/199593/labour-laws-workers-protest-media/>

³⁸ Dipanjan Chakraborty, et al, *Findings from a Civil Society Mediated and Technology Assisted Grievance Redressal Model in Rural India*, In Proc. ICTD 2017. Table 4 – using data from the Madhya Pradesh CM helpline, a typical village with 1000 households was found to have filed on average 9 grievances in a month, and assuming a volunteer is able to work on one grievance in a week with an out-of-pocket expense of Rs 100 per grievance for local travel and food/refreshments, the village may need up to 2 volunteers. In practice, this is likely to be lower because many grievances may be duplicate, and similar grievances can be taken up in groups for redressal. For example, bulk registration of grievances related to old-age pension that were disrupted due to Aadhar linkages, or provisioning of ration cards to families which were not listed as BPL at the time of the census but legitimately qualify for the status, can be taken up in bulk as “monthly projects” at the villages.