

Voices from the Margins

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A two-day conference brings together creators of news organisations that are helping to build an alternative Indian narrative



This evening, journalist P.Sainath's talk on the country's ongoing agrarian crisis will inaugurate the conference, 'We the Nation: Micro-narratives of Change' that's being organised by Godrej India Culture Lab. Sainath, the founder editor of the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) will also be discussing the work being done by PARI in reporting and documenting rural India, thus setting the tone for the conference on marginalised narratives. The idea behind the conference is to complicate and widen conversation in areas often overlooked by mainstream media. The second day will see panel discussions on how, alternative narratives can be revolutionised to provide greater agency to several groups working in this direction. Organisations like Sanatkada Samajik Peהל, which empowers Dalit and Muslim women in photography and video making, CGNet Swara, an online voice-based portal that allows ordinary citizens to report and listen to local stories that are moderated by journalists, and Sangham Radio, Asia's first all-women community radio, among others, will coalesce at Vikhroli to share and exchange ideas. This conference joins Godrej India Culture Lab's many events that unpack and navigate the many aspects of the modern Indian identity. Founded in 2011, the Culture Lab was designed with the aim of creating more nuanced conversations around the dynamism of modern India while also consciously fashioning a 'new' space. "The objective was to create an alternative space in Vikhroli and make it an ideas centre", explains Parmesh Shahani, head of Godrej India Culture Lab. "Cultural activities in the city seem to follow very colonial fault lines and are concentrated in South Mumbai, but this space hoped to shift the locus of discussion to an area considered a suburb, thus creating both a new idea space and a new physical one." Much of what the conference has in store continues along the same vein – to create a distinct niche in narratives and conversations about India. Digital Desh Drive, an initiative that annually studies how non-metro or Tier 2, 3 and 4 cities use technology and the internet, deliberately refers to these areas as Bharat. "India and Bharat are the same country," says General Manager of Digital Desh, Paritosh Sharma, "But often these areas are clubbed together with rural India when they are Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, the next evolutionary space after the urban India we inhabit." He explains that while it is understood that the next billion users who will adopt smartphone technology and the Internet are in India, not too many truly understand who the users are. The Digital Desh Drive collects data and stories by driving through these areas around the country and publishing books on their findings. Organisations like Khabar Lahariya and Video Volunteers will discuss how they not only source content, but also create a space that normalises these marginalised voices. Co-director of Video Volunteers, Stalin K., says their NGO was created in 2003 with the idea to shed light on the dark areas of mainstream media as it largely covers only urban issues. To combat that gap, Video Volunteers empowers marginalised communities to create diversity in the content and perspectives in reporting. Stalin along with three community correspondents from the organisation will share their work at the conference. "They will share the body of work they have generated for over a decade," says Stalin, "And will also highlight the impacts they have created through the follow-up on their stories." Zulekha Sayyed, Amol Lalzare and Yashodhara Salve will discuss house demolition in settlements in Mumbai, the building of an over-bridge for a station in Vangani especially for the safety of the visually impaired in the area, and the 'Khel Badal' campaign to dismantle patriarchy. Similarly, Khabar Lahariya, a women-run newspaper from Bundelkhand, was started in 2002 to create local, independent media in the region. Co-founder Shalini Joshi shares that the idea was to produce news local in content and language, while also establishing women as journalists. "These journalists are not just women, but women from the most marginalised communities," she says. She reveals that the journey was not easy as the correspondents had to break through male-dominated networks and spaces in districts that are deeply patriarchal, but their senior reporters have now gained immense respect and recognition. At the conference, Meera Devi, Khabar Lahariya's chief reporter, will share her work and experiences from the last decade. Her talk will include political reporting around the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election this year, stories about crime and corruption, as well her investigation into cases of tuberculosis breaking out in a village in the Banda district. The idea is also to draw together individuals of varied backgrounds and realities. "We hope to present a different side of Mumbai, and hope the audience goes back feeling connected to these issues," says Stalin. Joshi, on the other hand, hopes this exchange will result in support and interest for community-sourced news. First published by

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