

Explaining WATAN! An Analytical Perspective

Abstract: *Change doesn't happen overnight. It's built bit by bit, brick by brick. In order to bring about a positive change in the Indian society which will become healthy and fearless and will be guided by the principles of rationality and science, we need to overcome certain stigma about the food and other habits and do away with the dogma in the education system itself. However, the hegemonic class dishes out an artificial construct of an 'imaginary ground reality' by suppressing certain key information, against which all rational and scientific knowledge is tested and incidentally rejected at the end of the day. Two kinds of education systems are possible, one that perpetuates the 'construct' by reinforcing it over and over again, by turning education itself into a dogma via rote learning, while the other teaches to ask pertinent questions everywhere, digs suppressed data, and induces learning by solving problems and finding answers. This second alternative needs better instincts for survival on the students' part, which is more common among the already marginalised-to-the-abys section of the society. WATAN is a philanthropic organisation that works among this section, especially kids, imparts special vocational skills, and feeds them with especially protein-rich diet for sustenance, prepares them for the mainstream – not to become subservient to the mainstream causes but to take on the embedded evil design in it. It is a philanthropic exercise with a deep rooted political intent.*

Background Check

WATAN has been in operation for last five years or more purely as a personal philanthropic exercise of the author, though the name WATAN has been floated only around two years back. WATAN is a name, and the word has a meaning in more than one Indian language – 'the country' – but for us here at WATAN, it's a little more than that. We are proudly against all such ideas and practices that promote and perpetuate the blind, antagonistic Nationalismⁱ, which is the right-wingers' darling boy. Being a self-serving patriot at the expense of the People is inhuman, and is passé. We are the anti-Nationalists here.

In these two years we have presented many apparently disjoint or even unrelated avatars of our activities. The activities include a major brain-storming event with the intelligentsia and the known faces in the fields of Art and Culture (which is yet to happen), rescue operations of deserted or destitute children, rescuing and mainstreaming them, surveying the homeless populace of a city, feeding the homeless kids along with holding medical camps for them, rescuing and the victims of terror unleashed by the political goons and rehabilitating them with medical help, and extending stray help to some new and poor schools in the suburban areas. We also propose a unique school from our end that would refute rote learningⁱⁱ and will encourage asking questions and finding practical scientific solutions on hand. Nonetheless, these activities are not mutually exclusive, and they do have a common ideological and political root.

The discussion wouldn't have started yet as we strongly believe that WATAN is not yet completely ready with its infrastructure to take its mission further ahead, unless one of our friends (an academic of course) raised certain serious philosophical issues regarding the connexions between politics and philanthropy. Nonetheless, since we are handling peoples' money, where the benevolent donors have poured in without even trying to validate our reason or activities, it's our responsibility to remain transparent. Therefore, both our politics and philosophical roots too need to be exposed in the same manner that our accounts are. WATAN is a Peoples' Initiative, runs on peoples' money, refuses corporate funding indiscriminately (which is nothing but money-laundering at the fag-end of each FY), or even government funding. Those who believe that welfare works via NGO too should be funded from the public exchequer may please excuse us. Running a NGO on government funding is wrong on various accounts. First, it defeats the very concept of independence of the non-government organization. The government in a welfare society has its own channels and it must be doing welfare works through those channels only. Secondly, a taxpayer might

have had some other priorities at the back of his mind while paying his direct taxes, might have had expected certain other developments for his immediate benefit. In that case the channelized fund utilized by independent organizations such as a NGO is actually “misappropriated”. This is unethical in our diction, if not cheating on the taxpayer directly. A NGO, by virtue of being a smaller organization than the government, always has a limited charter, which may not address the precise issues of any arbitrary citizen, and thus the smaller organization cannot have any moral right to spend that money that comes from that arbitrary citizen. Spending from the public exchequer is the government’s job. If they spend callously, they should be held accountable for it. It’s not a NGO’s job to cover up for the government’s failure. A peoples’ initiative must therefore initiate a peoples’ movement. Otherwise, WATAN is a pointless exercise.

Before we remind ourselves of the main objectives of WATAN, let me go back to the friend’s narrative, or what I’d rather call a rant. In his fantastic worldview, a communist party ceases to be communist when it aspires to be at the power centre! To BE with the people is okay, sharing their woes, intervening occasionally may pass too, but communists should never look up at the power structure! As if one can be a communist without a party, simply by studying Marx, and by being benevolent. Well, he is entitled to his misconstrued blunder, but this twisted view is pre-empted by Marx’s Thesis eleven, ‘On Feuerbach’ as early as 1845ⁱⁱⁱ. Marx said that interpreting, examining the world is fine, but the point was to change it. Now, he too knew that the world cannot be changed by one species among its habitats, but what can be changed is the ‘homocentric world order’ that is the power equations and their parameters. Hence, changing the power structure was the only real objective there, all others being just tributaries to that. Nothing can be more ridiculous than to imagine a band of Marxists not talking about the class-divided and hierarchical system, the ruling class, the antagonism between the ‘system’ and the people. Call it hegemony^{iv}, if you would. BEING with the people is pointless when one doesn’t intend to eradicate the sources of their woes and sufferings, and thus helps the woes to perpetuate. There is a systematic subversion of the people, and the bourgeois state machinery is party to it irrespective of the colour of the party flags running the government. Democracy is always a parody of itself; precisely that is the fallacy of it. The so-called ‘independent choices’ can be and ARE moulded by the ruling class’s hegemony to fit their bills. If you are WITH the people, you must be trying to intervene, to tweak the system’s functions at any arbitrary point; you are by default in a head on clash against the power that be.

How WATAN intends to go ahead

The main objective of WATAN is to build a society which is

1. Healthy and Fearless
2. Guided by the principles of Rationality and Science.

To ask for such a lofty charter out of nothing is passé too; is a 19th century phenomenon actually. A society doesn’t become healthy, fearless, and rational all of a sudden as long as the root causes of being unhealthy, docile, and irrational hang around as usual. There are certain stigma about eating habit, callousness about professional counselling, ignorance about one’s rights and duties, and above all poor, very poor science education (in fact education in general) that are responsible for the existence of such a society of diminishing values and skills. The science is meted with ignorance and dogma, condescending remarks from the international community is refuted with post-truth. Attempts have been made to rectify the situation since the 19th century, some of which are significantly large, but sooner or later all such attempts failed as they become institutionalized and therefore theoretically flawed. The underlying philosophies of these attempts have been tweaked so that they stop questioning the ‘authority’, and lost the edge therefore, soon to emerge as a part of the ‘authority’ instead.

How did that disaster happen? Common sense tells us that while taking on the four vices mentioned above, i.e.

1. Stigma about food and personal hygiene and other habits

2. Callousness about accepting what the trained professionals have to say
3. Unawareness about the Constitutional Rights and Duties, and
4. Poor school education, especially science, that depends entirely on rote learning

It has to be borne in mind that all four need to be addressed together, for they are interwoven. Any piecemeal approach is bound to fail as it would inevitably be defeated by a self-contradiction. Our schooling system is either medieval, or colonial in nature. It is designed to produce docile, unsuspecting individuals who would never question, let alone disputing, the authoritative textbooks. Whatever would come their way posing as a textbook or a sacrosanct manual; the students will anchor their 'belief' in it, and will never verify their provenance. Attempts have been made to introduce different modes of learning and character-building for that matter, but the attempts confined themselves within the arena of schooling only, never even asked why genuine research works are so scarce in this part of the world. Awareness about the rights and duties is left to the political system only, the academia hardly discuss it, save some specialized discourses. The trained professionals, such as the doctors and engineers and economists, even physicists and educationists, are viewed either as money-sharks or with suspicion; their advice will always be taken with a pinch of salt from an imaginary reality, as if the sciences don't emerge from the reality itself. This imaginary reality which is used to moderate the professional expertise is actually an artificial construct dished out by the hegemony itself, suppressing certain key information that, if revealed, might actually overturn its pretention. It sometimes rests on half-knowledge, suppressed facts, sometimes on fantasies of religions etc. The more powerful the hegemony is, the more alienated the academic expertise is made to look like. A huge gap is there between the academic knowledge and the commonplace knowledge. And that gap seems irreconcilable. It happens so, because the so-called well-meaning attempts never, save for once or twice in the history, tried to address the construct, the imaginary reality, the stigma, the dogma, and the habits and so on. The society is left to become a rather schizophrenic one. We tend to forget that our education is never ever imparted on clean slates. There is no clean slate in reality. When a student picks up his/her first language, s/he is already exposed to the design and the deep structure^v.

Another main reason of such failures was that all of the alternative institutions had had a particular haste to merge with the mainstream and thus, quite like the government and other public institutions, they ignored the marginal and banked on the crème de la crème for the sake of their own survival. One major example is Tagore's Santiniketan, which had to submit itself for canonization and subservience therefore, since Tagore had to hand it over to the inner circle of power that be; e.g. Pandit Nehru et al, even though realizing that it might be the end of his own dreams. The effect was cadaverous and we all know that. Tagore's institution used to have a special, very important section for boosting the marginalized section of the society. He had such plans that would have almost worked like a mythical 'perpetual machine', and Visva-Bharati would have never required any dole from outside. But after 1961, that section – Sriniketan – was systematically bulldozed and what remains now is a caricature of a 19th century dream. Only the docile and non-profiteering was showcased and nourished. Tagore pioneered the concept of cooperatives in India. His own cooperatives all nosedived. Gandhi's dream - Khadi too went to oblivion. But on the other hand, brand Amul^{vi} not only survived but also flourished. On studying the history of Amul it transpires how it has been inclusive and therefore instrumental in raising the economy of a whole area and population of otherwise marginal farmers. What is more important is despite being a cooperative endeavour, Amul's management has always been professional, it never was a beneficiaries' cooperative.

This stupidity must not be repeated. WATAN intends to learn from the history. It is not an overtly political organization, true, but there is no point in doing something that is counter-productive, and that definitely goes against its basic political principle of standing up against the hegemony, the construed but imaginary reality of Indian heritage. To bring about certain meaningful changes in the system, however small, WATAN can never ignore the marginal. On the contrary, it wants to make the marginal its stronghold. We have been working with the destitute, the runaway kids, and the stark homeless. For two reasons: one, the public institutions never reach out to them and yet, two, they have the better survival instincts. And, most of all, we are not assuming any clean slate here. We

believe that there are two distinct kind of education; one is there to reinforce the hegemonic construct that systematically enhances vices 1 to 4 above, and the other that challenges it. Any Alternative Education is pointless if it doesn't challenge the prevalent hegemonic construct. Alternative Culture succumbs to the construct or any of its variants to its own peril, like Tagore's did.

We have written this several times on various fora, but a quick reminder may not be completely out of place here. How big is the problem of the abysmal marginality, the homeless people in the major cities? They are the "King's Leavings", remember them^{vii}? Those were the bloodless, fleshless, marrow-less human-like creatures walking one after another not talking to each other, also not responding when *Nandini*, the manifestation of Life, called them out loud. They were like shadows of themselves, yet not quite, for they still had some weight to be thrown upon the miners' psyche, upon the city itself. They were a clear message from the king himself, that if you chose defiance over unconditional obedience, you end up being like that. Yes, there they were merely from a fiction, Tagore's symbolic drama 'Red Oleanders', but still, aren't they so real? If you are a city-dweller, just look around you on the pavements, at the border areas of the railway stations, bus terminuses and just don't close your eyes at an unpleasant sight, a face or a dress not quite up to your taste, and you'll find one of these left-over people looking in your eyes. But sometimes, nay always, it's them who invade, occupy your space with their dirty, smelly clothes and stretched out hands.

Why people are made homeless? Why are they evicted from their land, if at all any existed? Homelessness is the abyss of poverty actually, and represents the most vulnerable, insecure section of the society. Its main purpose is to instil fear among others. It's a clear message to you and me that if we do not rush, do not obey, do not conform to the model of progression given to us, any of us just might be one of them. Our civilization has no place for them, doesn't recognize their existence on official records, for they are bare humans with no paper tags attached to them. They have no face, no identity proof, no address proof, no biometric data, no bank account, and of course no say in the realpolitik. The process that ends in some people being homeless is as political as any other form of political terror, military raid, and rape regardless of age, caste, gender. It's a way of establishing supremacy.

The Homeless People, occupying two fucking percent of the world demography and still growing, have no caste, creed, race, even gender often. In India, we have had 1.77 million of them back in 2011, which was in all possibilities a conservative, polished estimate to save faces of various governments. In reality, the number is much higher, almost four times as much, and in 2018, it must have grown by 1.2% a year. That conservative estimate has won us the eighth place on the world map, though we may be happy that seven countries including China is still leading before us. A flat 0.15% of the entire populace is homeless, that is 3 among 2000 people are haplessly homeless. That is every small locality of 400 households of average size hosts 3 such people at the minimum, the number of which might shot up to 12 in reality, which would imply that 3 families out of 400 are evicted from all possible shelters! That's scary, that's shameful. Of course the cities share the larger chunk, as villages of 400 households holds nothing to sustain so many people as parasites. We conducted a small sample survey (not a census) in Calcutta to get some basic info about these people. The cursory result is given below. We have a slightly different definition of the homeless from the govt. one. For us, **any kid under 16, not having a proof of address, and not going to any regular school is HOMELESS**. By this standard nearly 150000 people are homeless in this city, Kolkata; and 64% of them are kids (legally minor). This is 4 times as much as the 2011 Census goes.

Based on 152 Sample Respondents spread in 8 sample zones

1. Among the minors, there are more (+11%) girls than boys.
2. Most girls above 10 are victims of sexual assault, overtly or covertly. 2% are HIV positive!
3. 22% of the adults are Terminally Sick
4. The median of the age of the kids here is 13, which means there are more of them between 10 and 16.

5. One new face joins the crowd every 1.9 days
6. One of them leaves (thanks to death/migration/change of status) every 25 days.
7. This means an addition of 177.50 people each year. Demonetization saw a particular rise in this growth rate. Mostly immigrant labours from the neighbouring states added to the regular influx.
8. This is topped by seasonal influxes just after a flood, or a cropping season somewhere.
9. Rate of childbirth is falling every year.
10. 92% of them are malnourished (of course!). In our recent medical camps, we have so far examined 46 kids in total, to find only 3 kids are somewhat acceptably nourished among them.
11. 40% or more are victims of drug/chemical abuse.
12. Literacy rate is below 35%. But all of them are good in arithmetic (Survival Technique?).
13. Almost all kids between 16-18 years of age are on the police records for various petty crimes (mostly false reports).

Though our ultimate objective is to go for a rationalized education system, on the principle being “Health First” we have started feeding these malnourished homeless kids. Our capacity is limited; so we are selecting the “most malnourished” under our feeding programmes first. They form the control group for our plans. Here comes the most difficult part of our planning. Feeding the weakest without expecting any result is a good philanthropic exercise in itself. But what’s the point? According to our estimates, there are 60000 such kids in this city alone. If we feed 60 of them, we are serving 1 in a 1000 actually. 999 are still left out. What difference are we making? Nothing, a big duck! We actually need to roll out our real plan at this point. Our eight-fold plan can be bulleted as below:

1. Identify the beneficiaries through the medical camp
2. Feed the weakest with well-designed diet which every nutritionist would approve.
3. After a given period, run another round of camps to see if there is any improvement in health.
4. If yes, run a professional Aptitude Test on the kids. (If not, then replace the kid with another, and send the first kid for treatment, more feeding etc.)
5. Bring the qualified kids under one roof, a home, or a day care centre where there will be a dedicated kitchen for them. This kitchen, on the one hand saves half of the feeding cost (food is a 100% profit business), while on the other the extra resources can be utilized to run a profit-making food business. Actually one meal sold at the market rate is equivalent to one meal earned for a kid.
6. Imparting education on them with special educational aids and tool kits. We have also been working on preparing special books and other materials for them. Product preview will be rolled out soon.
7. Imparting certain special skills on them, that are both vocational and defence skills in nature.
8. The real good ones can be engaged in various micro-business models, others can find jobs in various small to medium outfits. If we find some real academic talents (which is not very likely given their protein malnourishment as infants), we can arrange mainstream schooling for them.

And this entire loop above can run every year. Yes it’s a meticulous and onerous task to keep this groundwork on. But then, there is no easy alternative of having a tediously built robust alternative hegemony in place.

Financial and Business Model

Any question regarding our funding model is a pertinent one, is a million dollar question in fact. WATAN’s ideals can remain incorruptible only as long as we don’t let some frosty funder’s ideology override ours. We have already discussed why we are against using any money from the public exchequer. We are also inhibited about accepting corporate donations that are made only for laundering the unaccounted cash taking advantage of the Income Tax benefits that the charitable trusts enjoy. However, CSR funds should be alright with us subject to detailed discussion about all the nuances. But then, where from comes the money? In last one year or so, we have spent approximately four lakh rupees (Rs. 415,363.00 to be precise) and collected nearly as much, of which yours truly has shelled out

over Rs. 70,000.00. The rest of the money came from friends, who are professionals from different walks of life, mostly doctors. One can have a peek at the accounts page on our website to get the exact figures. Nearly Rs. 180,000.00 has been spent for treatment of 15 victims of the 3-tier Panchayat Polls and related violence; Rs. 60,000.00 has gone into the rescue operations of a few little kids and for detoxification and rehabilitation of one of them; more than Rs. 100,000.00 has been allotted and blocked for feeding the homeless kids and the 3 medical camps so far; nearly Rs. 35,000.00 for the formal registration of WATAN, and its website; some Rs. 10,000.00 has gone as administrative expenses, and what remains as cash in hand is blocked too for some remaining legal expenses. Nonetheless, this cannot probably run forever, as the sources dry up, like my own account is dry right now. We tried various other modes for collecting lump some, like Art Sales, but that never took off really. Regular contributions from the limited number of members we have so far is also not that regular, and not adequate by any means.

Keeping this in mind, we now have to go for some fund-generating exercise too. This was always on the cards, but probably not so early. We initially thought of setting up the school first, and then moving on to a cooperative kind of business with the kids who would be acquiring certain special skills. However, now the situation becomes such that we have to launch a business model in order to run the school and home.

The average price of food, a rice meal with adequate food value, in this city is around Rs. 30/31 depending on the location, which may vary up to Rs. 35.00 towards the southern part of the city. But we all know that the cost-at-kitchen of a meal worth Rs. 30.00 is no more than Rs. 16.00 actually. Our top feeding capacity is 70 kids a day (select 14 from 5 camps across the city), which means daily average spend is Rs. 2100.00 if procured from the random vendors. However, if the same 70 meals are cooked somewhere centrally, the cost comes down to Rs. 1120.00/day, saving nearly a thousand rupees every day. More, after working for merely 3 hours in the morning the same kitchen remains idle for the rest of the day, while, it could actually accommodate another 3-4 work-hours easily producing another 70 meals. If the products are designed cleverly and the quality is maintained at a decent level, those 70 meals could be sold at the market rate making the kids' meals practically free of cost. Well, almost, for the logistics expense to carry the food to the consumer is not counted yet. If our volunteers and the trained kids can handle this under a strict GPS-driven monitoring system, the project Feed-a-Kid reaches breakeven in no time. Logistics too can be covered with slight adjustments in product and marketing. At that point of time, it's not yet fully self-reliant, but since the donations received can be amplified in a considerable ratio, pressure on the individual donors reduces right away.

The second option that we have is selling the educational material that we are designing. We are specially focusing on *Bangla* language, Mathematics and History and Geography combined. The training begins at pre-school level, because that is exactly the phase where the deep structure is introduced to the kid, which would in turn perpetuate the hegemonic construct to reign over the minds. Clean slate is not assumed. We are, on this front, actually at the market survey mode. We will bring you the results soon.

It is therefore an imperative that we continue with this current donation model for at least three more months, where from December this year, we may need to collect donations at the rate around Rs. 50,000.00 per month, while if by March we can launch our kitchen by pumping in another 25-30 thousands for the utensils, fridge etc. the required donation may drop down below 30 thousand sharply.

Going back to the ideological question again, what exactly is the significance of this WATAN movement, political or otherwise? It is difficult to predict all possible events at this moment. Yet, a few changes are certain, as below.

1. It introduces a model of smart philanthropy, and replaces the hopeless charity leaving the beneficiaries as hapless as ever. I can remember only one more NGO that follows a model somewhat close to this.

2. It can educate some kids according to their requirements, not according to a rigid and almost obsolete syllabus. If rote learning is not practised, and if we sincerely take care of the physical and mental well-being, it can attract more beneficiaries without having to persuade much.
3. The alternative schooling can actually raise an army that would be constantly at the loggerhead with all the evils that our society nourishes covertly. The army may be small, but effective.
4. This also drastically reduces the probability of raising potential criminals, and HIV carriers.
5. This begins the groundwork that communist parties should have had done long before.
6. The movement can spread to other cities and semi-urban townships in India. Wherever the homeless people flock together, it's taken for granted that both our commercial services offered through WATAN are also going to find some buyers there.

Hopefully, this explains our position as WATAN.

ⁱ Tagore, Rabindranath (1917); Nationalism; <https://chaityapatrika.com/?p=760>

ⁱⁱ Feynman, Richard; Robbins, Jeffrey (2005). *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out: The Best Short Works of Richard P. Feynman*. New York: Basic Books. ISBN 9780465023950.

ⁱⁱⁱ The "**Theses on Feuerbach**" are eleven short philosophical notes written by Karl Marx as a basic outline for the first chapter of the book *The German Ideology* in 1845. Marx, Karl. Simon, Lawrence, ed. *The German Ideology*. Hackett Publishing Company

^{iv} "Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals [administrators, scholars and scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers, etc.] experience through an esprit de corps their uninterrupted historical continuity, and their special qualifications, they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. This self-assessment is not without consequences in the ideological and political fields, consequences of wide-ranging import. The whole of idealist philosophy can easily be connected with this position, assumed by the social complex of intellectuals, and can be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as "independent" [and] autonomous, [and] endowed with a character of their own, etc." — Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (1971), pp. 7–8

^v Kordić, Snježana (1991). "Transformacijsko-generativni pristup jeziku u Sintaktičkim strukturama i Aspektima teorije sintakse Noama Chomskog" [Transformational-generative approach to language in Syntactic structures and Aspects of the theory of syntax of Noam Chomsky] (PDF). *SOL: Lingvistički časopis (in Serbo-Croatian)*. **6** (12–13): 103–112. ISSN 0352-8715. ZDB-ID 1080348-8.

Chomsky, Noam (1965); *Aspects of the Theory of syntax*, MIT Press

^{vi} <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kurien-strode-like-a-titan-across-the-bureaucratic-barriers-and-obstacles/article3877337.ece?test=2&textsize=small>

^{vii} Tagore, Rabindranath (1924); (Tr) Nupur Gangopadhyay-Lahiri (2008), Punshcha Publisher, ISBN: 97-81-7332-535-9