Greetings from Mumbai First. My entire team joins me in wishing you and your families a peaceful and healthy year ahead.

Like all Mumbaikars, we have been very concerned about the deteriorating air quality in our city over the last couple of months, causing immense health problems, particularly among senior citizens and children. While our Environment Mission will look at these issues, we have also proposed to the State Authorities that a task force be set up to see how the city should deal with the challenges of climate change. It is also proposed that the experiences of several countries like Netherlands, UK and Italy be obtained as models to follow. While talking about the consequences of climate change, we find urban flooding in Mumbai has not received the attention it deserves. Various committees of the United Nations and the STERN Committee Report have identified Mumbai as one of the cities vulnerable to climate change and sea-water temperature rise. We need to look into this and certain proactive steps should be taken to mitigate the consequences of climate change.

Our heartiest congratulations to the State Government for the wonderful and very impressive Magnetic Maharashtra Convergence 2018 organized in Mumbai. The fact that a large number of heads of business communities from India and abroad participated in this impressive conference and proposed to make major investments in Maharashtra, speaks volumes for the excellent work the government has done in the recent past to make Maharashtra an attractive destination for investments. However, as Anand Mahindra has correctly reminded us, cities are “gateways to a State” and Mumbai is a “gateway to not only Maharashtra but also India”. If the quality of life in Mumbai is not comparable to international standards, this will turn away investors. It should therefore be our endeavour to make Mumbai regain its title, “Urbs Prima Indis”.

Recently, we organized a multi-stakeholder Round Table discussion on Judicial Pendency in India. Shailesh Gandhi, former Chief Information Commissioner, shared his ideas on this very important subject. We are taking this up further with the authorities to see how some of the problems that cause delays in dealing with judicial cases could be resolved.

This year, we are planning to showcase the work of several people and organizations who have done commendable work for Mumbai. In the same light, we will also be covering stories from companies which have made a positive impact on the city through CSR initiatives. We are happy to include in this issue, the very impressive story of Mastek Ltd.

We welcome the excellent contribution of Tam Vu, Consul, Consulate General of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Mumbai, India. She shares her impressions of living in Mumbai. We are hoping there will be similar contributions from other residents of Mumbai.

We would also like to have your comments on this publication. Please also tell us whether you would like us to cover any special item dealing with Mumbai, which could be of interest to our readers.

With all good wishes,

Narinder Nayar
Chairman, Mumbai First
We at Mumbai First are delighted to present our first issue of 'First & Foremost' for the year 2018.

'First & Foremost' is not just for sharing the on-going activities of Mumbai First. It's also a platform for updates on Mumbai and the MMR region that affect the city and its citizens.

Sharing initiatives and experiences of Mumbaikars for the city they love and care for is an integral part of the newsletter. You will also find a few new columns that have been introduced from this issue, like Corporate Corner, Festivals@Mumbai and Guest Speak.

The New Year started with an inspiring event at Rashtrapati Bhavan. On January 22nd, Hon’ble President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, felicitated 112 exceptional women achievers who were the first to set a milestone in their respective fields. Each one is a role model not just for women but for every Indian.

While we acknowledge and felicitate women achievers, the scenario in everyday life is not encouraging. Even in Mumbai where we take pride in being the safest city in India for women, the situation has changed over the last few years. Unfortunately recent surveys show that we Mumbaikars are emulating Delhi in two negative areas: air pollution and safety of women.

The foundation of a civilised society is in how it treats its women. Though we call them our Better Half, our actions at times don’t match our words.

From kindergarten to university and from private parties to public places, the safety and dignity of girls and women are increasing areas of concern. While on the one hand it’s good to see Bollywood mainstream cinema picking up the sensitive but important subject of sanitary pads, due emphasis on girls’ and women’s health has a lot of scope for improvement, even in the city of Mumbai.

We at Mumbai First are committed to these issues through our Security and Health Missions. I appeal to each one of you to take a pause, introspect and take action towards making Mumbai more inclusive and safe. We will be more than happy to have your inputs and support for our initiatives.

Let me end with wishing you all a rewarding new financial year!

Jai Ho!

Atul Bhide
CEO, Mumbai First

Salute to India’s Woman Power. Hon’ble President of India with 112 exceptional women achievers, January 2018, at Rashtrapati Bhavan.
Guest Speak

Cross Culture–India and Vietnam

Recently we had the honour of having Prime Minister, Nguyễn Xuân Phúc at our 69th Republic Day celebration, demonstrating the strong partnership between Vietnam and India.

We are delighted to have Tam Vu, Consul, Consulate General of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Mumbai, India, as our Special Guest who shares with us her experiences of living in Mumbai.

On the other hand, Ashika Balakrishnan, Mumbai First Fellow, who recently visited Vietnam shares her travel tales.

Mumbai As I See It

On January 2017, I left Hanoi—the city that I had lived in for nearly 15 years—and moved to Mumbai for my first post. Colleagues and friends shared with me many stories and experiences before departure but the real experience of Mumbai was different from what I had been told. I realize that Mumbai is nice and beautiful in many ways.

Mumbai should be called the animal friendly city as many animals and birds find the city a peaceful home. In Hanoi, birds like pigeons and sparrows are seen sometimes on trees and in several quiet parks. In Mumbai, they can be seen everywhere. Wherever we are, on busy streets or quiet roads in suburban regions, looking out of the office window, we can see flocks of pigeons, crows and sparrows. Not only birds but we can also find dogs, cats, cows and sometimes goats wandering around without being disturbed by citizens. Their presence makes me feel peaceful and close to nature more than ever while living here.

The local train system in Mumbai is wonderful. Hanoi has a railway system but it is not considered a popular choice for Hanoians as it has limited trains, few routes and just some stops across the city. Therefore, I am deeply impressed that Mumbai has about 200 trains and plans to buy 200 more to serve millions of commuters each day. Mumbai’s local trains are modern with three lines and a hundred stations across the city which helps people reach many places easily. They are fast—only about 40 minutes from Churchgate to Jogeshwari (near my home)—and affordable (10 rupees/ticket) for almost all citizens. Additionally, Mumbai trains have separate coaches for ladies which makes it safer and more convenient for women travellers.

I will be missing a crucial point if I do not mention how Mumbaikars are helpful, friendly and warm-hearted. Once last year, our neighbors drove my son to the hospital when I was not at home and stayed with us until late at night to make sure we understood what the doctor said. We got help when our car ran out of gasoline in a traffic jam and stopped suddenly. A man on a motorbike was kind enough to buy gasoline for us without demanding any money even though he was in hurry to pick up his son from school. Numerous other Mumbaikars that I cannot list here treated us like family, shared with us their stories and supported us in the initial days of our stay here. They truly make Mumbai our second home sweet home.
The negative point about Mumbai is that many beaches are dirty. Hanoi is an inland city and we cannot go to beaches very often as the nearest beach is about 120 km away while Mumbai is blessed with many beautiful beaches. However, many people do not seem to appreciate this natural gift. They come to enjoy the view and relax after a long working day but they also dump their debris on the beach which makes the scene less romantic and bad odour spreads everywhere.

The homeless children make me feel sad whenever I go out in Mumbai. Many a time I see these kids living under the bridge, in temporary houses made from plastic panels and old sheets without basic facilities such as a toilet, electricity and fresh water. I come across children of my little son’s age roaming around without any clothes, even in the rainy season, asking for food. I hope that these kids will receive more attention from the government and philanthropists so they can live in better conditions.

Ms. Tam Vu
Consul General of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Mumbai, India

Vietnam–Land of Staggering Beauty and Cultural Complexities
Ashika Balakrishnan

Bustling City Life

Alleyways, bustling markets and traffic. While I was travelling, I witnessed thousands of motorbikes flowing chaotically yet synchronously through the cramped streets of Vietnam. The city moves to its own beat and everyone seems happy to be there. I found that Vietnam has a unique blend of old and new, with a beautiful cityscape in a compact space. The local people moved about with conical hats on their heads. This was a common sight which to me enhanced the flavour of the city.

Hồ Chí Minh’s District 1 is still home to many wide airy buildings from the French colonial era like the Reunification Palace, Notre-Dame Cathedral, the city’s Central Post office and the Opera house. I was surprised at how well these historic buildings were maintained—and tourists like us were very well informed. They also have a large, open, pedestrian-only promenade on the Nguyễn- Huy Walking Street along with beautiful urban parks in every part of the city. The city had wide tree-lined pavements. Amidst all the chaos one can find a place to sit, relax and enjoy the beauty of the surroundings.
**Ben Thanh Market** is Ho Chi Minh’s most iconic trading centre around District 1. Old apartment and office buildings have been repurposed into shopping centres very similar to our very own Crawford market. Being a popular shopping spot for traditional food, fashion and souvenirs, the prices of items are pretty high; haggling is expected in this huge complex. One of the most important facets of Ho Chi Minh is street food; you can find a variety of regional specialities from across Vietnam. Flavours wafting in the air close to these food stalls awakened my taste buds and mesmerized me into having a quick bite. Small metal tables and plastic stools are a familiar sight along the streets of the city very similar to our pavbhaji and dosa stalls. I sampled the traditional Vietnamese dish—Phô, a traditional noodle soup—and a Bánh Mì sandwich which was made with a French baguette. There are a lot of layers and textures involved in their food: crunchy, punchy pickles, spices and roasted meat.

This is the authentic flavour of Vietnam. A hub for good strong coffee; there are little coffee shops serving tit bits and snacks at the corner of every street akin to our corner street chai shops. The city is dotted all over with quaint Buddhist temples, filled with elaborate wooden carvings and statues.

**Thriving Mekong River Village**

Mekong River Village, Mekong Delta. The Mekong Delta is a 39,000 square kilometre waterway, which is densely populated, containing markets, villages and schools floating onto the estuaries. The local people here are dependent on the river for their living. I travelled around in a Sampan—a narrow boat—and paddled my way down the river while making numerous stops at the various floating markets. The local Mekong people have a thriving business and generations of families continue the traditions of their forefathers. I had a great time browsing and purchasing a variety of cultural knick-knacks such as handicrafts and handmade goods.

Another iconic attraction: the Cu Chi Tunnels of Ho Chi Minh. We got a sneak-peek at the underground life of Vietnamese soldiers during the American war. This site has over 120 km of underground tunnels, with trapdoors, living areas, kitchens, hospitals, armoury and command centres. All to help people disappear underground to safety.

The Cu Chi Tunnels were not only places for cover but also played a key role in combat operations. While visiting the war museums in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, you get a sense of the Vietnamese people’s resolve and continued struggle for freedom against the French and subsequently Americans. This visit was truly an emotional experience and thought-provoking for me, and a sad reflection on human apathy and cruelty.

**UNESCO World Heritage Site—Ha Long Bay**

Ha Long Bay situated in northeast Vietnam is known for its emerald waters and cave-like limestone islands in various shapes and sizes topped with a forest rise. This was a must-see destination for me. The 2-day cruise tour was a popular choice where we get a chance to truly experience natural beauty at its closest. The calm sea breeze with a stunning view sums up my bay experience along with activities like, kayaking, swimming and exploring tunnels with stalagmites / stalactites. I was in awe not only of the natural beauty surrounding me, but also of the women rowing the boats, who could paddle just with their feet!
The Flag Man of Mumbai

A national flag represents a nation; it is a symbol of unity to lead us on one common path of Dharma even after being of different faiths and religions. It invokes a sense of pride and respect in the citizens of India.

The national flag has always been considered a sacred entity and out of the reach of the common man. In 2002, thanks to the efforts of industrialist Navin Jindal, the flag code was amended and citizens got the freedom to express their nationalist emotions by displaying the Indian tricolor.

Meet Rakesh Bakshi, a Mumbai-based businessman, who is passionate about our national flag, the Tiranga. He is turning his dream into reality by installing monumental flags in and around Mumbai and advocating regular use of the flag among Indians. You may connect with Mr. Bakshi through his foundation’s website: http://dkflagfoundation.com/

Himani Baid of Mumbai First in conversation with the Flag Man of Mumbai, Rakesh Bakshi.

Here are excerpts from their chat at his office in Powai, Mumbai.

MF: What inspired you to start this movement?

RB. Born in an Army family, wherever I lived I would see the national flag swaying high but it was out of reach for me as only dignitaries were allowed to hoist the flag. There was always this wish to touch the flag, feel it and experience a feeling of pride. During my visit to Istanbul, Turkey, I saw their national flag unfurling everywhere in the city. The idea of bringing our national flag to the masses came to my mind and I tried to replicate the idea in my city. Thus I began with this one of its kind initiative where I wanted to see our flag swaying high in every corner of the city. I also wanted to create an awareness regarding the flag code-the do’s and don’t’s- and clear the misconceptions and fears in the minds of Indian citizens regarding the flag.

MF: What is the mission of D.K. Flag Foundation?

RB. Our aim is to celebrate the freedom of our existence every day. Remembering the martyrs who sacrificed their lives and gave us an independent country, we are here to create awareness of the national
flag and clear misconceptions such as, common citizens are not permitted to own or display the flag in their homes, offices and premises. I want to tell people that nationalism and patriotism are not mere slogans. Through this initiative we are making an attempt to rekindle the spirit of nationalism by upholding the dignity of our Tiranga.

MF. How many flag installations have been done so far?

RB. Till now we have installed monumental flags at 5 places in and around Mumbai. They are:
- Hutatma Chowk, Ambarnath - 100 ft. Flag Mast Installation
- Raj Bhavan, Governor's Residence - 150 ft. Flag Mast Installation
- University of Mumbai, Kalina Campus - 150 ft. Flag Mast Installation
- Thane City, Majiwada - 100 ft. Flag Mast Installation
- ND Studio, Karjat

MF. What do you think is the significance of these flag installations?

RB. The national flag signifies our modern democratic, secular and liberal values, which should be embraced by all. When we see our flag we rise above our narrow considerations of religion, caste, language, region, etc. and it reminds us of being, first and foremost, Indians. Ambarnath is the first municipality in India to have a national flag. The University of Mumbai is the first university in the world to have a national flag on its premises. Through this initiative we want to invoke a sense of national pride in each and every citizen every time they see the tricolor unfurling near them.

Contd on page 14
Mumbai First conducted a multi-stakeholder Round table discussion on Judicial Pendency in India. Shailesh Gandhi, former Chief Information Commissioner and RTI activist, made a presentation demonstrating how judicial pendency can be significantly addressed by simply filling the vacancies across the courts in the country. Many other solutions including the use of technology, promotion of the mediation practice and using schools and government offices to augment infrastructure were discussed.

It was unanimously agreed that filling of judicial vacancies was the only mechanical solution requiring no policy intervention of any sort which could successfully address this issue. Everyone agreed that the Chief Justice of Mumbai High Court and the Chief Minister of Maharashtra supporting the “no vacancy” policy can lead to a successful model.

Shailesh Gandhi has shown through simple mathematical how vacancies in judiciary can be filled. It is time this formula is implemented. The vacancies can be filled the day a judge is appointed. This is a simple doable solution which will help to reduce the pending cases.

Neeta Kolhatkar – City Editor, Free Press Journal

L to R: Ashwini Thakar, Bijal Vora, Rahul Kamerkar, Ashank Desai, Pragui Kapadia, Mohana Nair, Justice B. N Shrikrishna, Shailesh Gandhi, Roger Pereira, Narinder Nayar, Nandan Maluote and Atul Bhide
Festivals@Mumbai

Versova Fish Festival

Ashika Balakrishnan, Mumbai First Fellow, shares her experience at this vibrant festival

About the Kolis

Versova Koliwada is situated on the palm-fringed edge of the western coast of Mumbai, with over 300 trawlers and around 5000 households. The Kolis are a traditional fishing community and the first settlers of Mumbai. Even today fishing continues to be their main means of making a living. The Kolis have a strong sense of community. Their way of life has remained relatively unchanged for millennia. They have managed to integrate well with the city of Mumbai while retaining their identity with pride.

The catch of the season: showcasing Koli culture

Pravin Nashiba, a fisherman’s son, says that of late, there are more fishermen than fish to catch! The competition is fierce and many people of the new generation like him have taken up jobs outside the koliwada. Studying for a banking job, Pravin is reluctant to leave the community that his forefathers have built but circumstances compel him to seek work elsewhere.

The Koliwada festival at Versova is one of many in Mumbai that showcases the rich Koli culture and provides a window of economic opportunity for its residents. This year the 3-day festival was held on 26th–28th January and featured traditional seafood, folk songs, dance and drama. Fresh fish was handpicked each day from the morning catch for the delicious spread on offer. Each stall had koli women dressed in bright coloured saris and a huge centre stage where they showcased some lively folk music and a traditional folk dance, incorporating elements of fishing and the sea. The dancers portrayed the movement of the boats and waves and the act of netting the fish.

The Versova Festival is an annual fair where Mumbaikars get a chance to truly embrace the Koli way of life and have a fun-filled cultural and culinary extravaganza.
Corporate Corner

As part of our special series on corporate houses making a positive impact on the city and its citizens through their CSR initiatives, we are happy to bring you the first such story from a leading corporate house – Mastek Ltd.

Mastek for Mumbai

With the mission “Informed Giving, Responsible Receiving” the Mastek Foundation was founded in 2002. It is the CSR arm of Mastek. We support various need-based projects through partner Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).

We also help NGOs to be better governed by providing IT support, which is our core skill. We aim to inspire individuals and corporations to come forward and contribute to society as informed givers. At Mastek Foundation we believe that with a clear vision and direction, we can make a difference.

Mastek goes all tech for CSR projects

The Foundation supports a wide array of causes like education, healthcare, disaster relief, women’s empowerment and environmental sustainability through various NGOs in Mumbai and beyond. In 2017-18 we were proud to have supported 15 NGO projects and encouraged the art of retail fundraising among 27 NGOs across the country. This together has a social outreach of 8220.

Marketplace for NGOs

Srujna has been holding exhibitions in Mastek premises for three years. More than the opportunity to earn, lesser-privileged women have always received a positive response and a lot of respect from the organizer and employees. The women always have a great sale day.

Jyotika, Founder.
Ashank Desai, Co-Founder, Mastek Ltd highlighted the power of innovation to develop working solutions to address social problems. “Project Deep Blue is an opportunity for engineering students to interact with real life problems and use technology to drive wider social impact,” he said. Ashank, an Alumnus of IIT Mumbai, is passionate and committed towards the cause of education as well. He actively supports more than 90 schools through his personal initiative.

**Technology for driving social impact:**

IT being Mastek’s core skill, we help NGOs develop low-cost IT solutions to enhance their ability for social outreach. A few partners like Kherwadi Social Welfare Association, SNEHA, Magic Bus India Foundation and Mission for Vision are now enabled to impact over 900,000 women, children and youth across Mumbai and peripheral areas.

**Project Deep Blue:**

Stepping into its third consecutive season, Project Deep Blue is a unique contest for IT students from the top 18 engineering colleges in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, to design, develop and build technology solutions to address various social problems in the fields of education, malnutrition, healthcare, citizen services – facilitated and identified by the Mastek Foundation. The project was initiated to provide a platform to encourage budding technologists to use technology for driving social impact.
Employee Engagement and other initiatives

On an average, 15-30% of Mastek employees are usually part of the payroll giving program. Mastek is proud to have over 70% of its workforce being actively part of this program. This year, 717 employees contributed 4220 volunteering hours for various initiatives like the blood donation drive for children with Thalassemia, tree plantation drive, the Giving Week and the Mastek Foundation Run.

We are grateful to a highly passionate group of employees who are part of the governing council. The Mastek Foundation team seeks advice and support from the council right from selecting partner NGOs to charting out CSR activities, employee engagement initiatives, awareness generation drives and the like.

Inspired is the annual fundraiser for Mastek Foundation. This year, singer Sanjeevani Bhelande paid tribute to Lata Mangeshkar, who completed 75 years in Indian cinema. The fundraiser was for Snehalaya, an organization that works for the welfare of trafficked children. Snehalaya raised a whopping Rs 38.5 lakh through the show. These funds were used to build an adoption center in Ahmednagar. Sudhakar Ram, Group CEO and Managing Director, Mastek, inaugurated Snehalaya, the adoption centre.

Every year individuals across Mumbai including employees from Mastek and Majesco run for a cause at the Mastek Foundation Run. Funds raised at this event go to support our partner NGOs. This year we received the overwhelming support of 1200 people.

The Mastek Foundation Run has grown into a premier event for the Navi Mumbai community. I encourage Mastekeers and Majescians to come out in large numbers with their families and join the ‘serious fun run’!

Radhakrishnan Sundar, Co-Founder, Mastek-Majesco.

Impact:

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It is the employees whose regular support backed by MASTEK management ensures our sustainable support for various causes. The tireless work by NGO partners keeps us motivated to work harder and serve more deserving causes.
ME: Any incident that sparked people’s interest in knowing more about the flag code?

RB: After the first flag was installed in Hutatma Chowk, Ambarnath, I received a call to say that I would be arrested because the flag was flying at night. I informed them that after a policy decision by the Ministry of Home Affairs it was now permitted to fly the tricolor at night as well, provided the flag was 100 feet tall and properly illuminated.

An incident occurred during the flag installation at Mumbai University, Kalina Campus. As it was near the airport, a question was raised whether the installation could be done without the permission of the Aviation Authority. We had to remove the flag for a few days but then we checked that it comes under the “air free” zone and so there was no problem.

ME: What is your vision and message to the people?

RB: My vision is that each and every corner of the city should have our Tiranga. I am starting with Mumbai and surrounding areas because that’s where I live. 10 more flag installations in various places like Kalyan, Thane, Ulhasnagar, Badlapur and Powai are in the pipeline.

The fact that I am not selling flags or doing business with them is appreciated by all. I distribute lapel flags free of charge to those who are passionate like me and want to wear it every day. It’s a small movement that I have started which has the potential to connect Indians, above their individuality and inspire them to do something for their nation.

My message to all is—let’s all come together with pride for our Tiranga.

Musings on Magnetic Maharashtra

The Magnetic Maharashtra Convergence 2018 event was the mainstay of newspaper headlines in the third week of February. This premier global investment fair took shape as a mega event held at the MMRDA grounds at Bandra Kurla Complex from 19-23 February. The inauguration at the hands of the Hon Prime Minister and the announcement of challenging investment targets were the highlights.

While the event was initially by invitation only, it was good to see that spot registrations were welcomed from the very first day. This gave many common Mumbaikars the chance to participate. The entire venue had a vibrant and festive atmosphere with seamless crowd management right from the point of entry. Various pavilions and three seminar rooms had been thematically and aesthetically designed to engage visitors. Over two days, the seminar rooms covered a wide spectrum of issues from future industries and sustainability to employment and infrastructure.

My principal interest was in the session on Smart Cities and the Internet of Things (IoT) and it didn’t disappoint in the least. With packed audiences, global experts gave glimpses of the future of urban India and there was much to look forward to. I also attended engrossing sessions on Sustainability and Women Entrepreneurs.

Another big attraction was the pavilions. Laid out like a world expo, they showcased the manufacturing prowess and future plans of Maharashtra’s major manufacturing hubs. It was good to see SMEs alongside corporate giants powering each pavilion. This same ethos was carried into the busy food court which offered fast food alongside an array of cuisines from across Maharashtra State.

Finally, the exhibition area was a showcase of large infrastructure projects including Metro Rail, High-Speed Rail, Eastern Waterfront, Mumbai Nagpur Expressway, Coastal Road, Navi Mumbai Airport Townships and many more. The quality of the exhibits and the scale of the projects made for an impressive display that left visitors awestruck.

Like thousands of Mumbaikars, I too look forward to the next investment summit and quietly wish for a Maharashtra State Expo to also grace the MMRDA grounds some day.

Gautam Kirtane
PADWOMAN of Mumbai

Dr. Bharati Lavekar, MLA, Versova, Mumbai, and founder of India’s first digital bank for Sanitary Pads was felicitated by the Hon’ble President of India for her exceptional efforts. Dr. Lavekar shares her journey for the readers of ‘First & Foremost’.

I have been working in the field of Women’s Empowerment for a long time. Though India is progressing ahead on various fronts, there has been very little done to provide proper infrastructure and basic facilities to women for their menstrual needs.

Use of proper sanitary pads is extremely low amongst women in India. I consider it a woman’s fundamental right to have proper hygiene and a clean environment during her special days. I formed a foundation to provide this right to women. Today more than one lakh seven thousand women are members of this foundation, who get 10 sanitary pads free of cost every month.

I decided to address this issue by providing a sanitary napkin vending machine in schools so that girl students would not face embarrassment during their special days.

Free consultation is provided to women by gynecologists. Those who wish to donate sanitary pads or wish to sponsor pads for needy girls can do so through Sanitary Pad banks. Our final aim is that no girl should miss school due to her menstrual cycle. I have been working in Maharashtra for many years through ‘Beti Bachao Abhiyan’. In my assembly constituency, I personally go and welcome the newborn girl child, so that the girl’s birth becomes an event that would make the family and the community proud.

There are a number of religious and community based misconceptions amongst women which prevent them from using proper sanitary pads. I decided to create awareness about this.

We are advocating 4 days optional ‘period leave’ to schoolgirls.

Today, almost 98% manufacturers of sanitary pad are multinational corporations. This could be the reason for the high cost of sanitary pads. Therefore, we are also making efforts to make sanitary pads available through women self-help groups.

Creating a society with able and healthy women, by providing sanitary pads, is the aim of my community service initiative. This will be true women’s empowerment.

It was a humbling experience to get acknowledged by the President of India for my efforts over the years.

Dr. Bharati with the beneficiaries.
Mumbai’s Lifeline—On the right track!

02.01.2018, the first working day of the year and my first alarm had been snoozed! Like any other working day, I get ready and rush through my door into the war zone that is my daily commute from Borivali to Nariman Point. My first fight for a rickshaw takes me to the mass of humanity and perspiration that is Borivali Station. I am battle-hardened after a decade of commuting on the western railway. As I sprint to catch my train on the regular platform, I am confronted by a big surprise. There before me stands this spanking new Air Conditioned Local Train waiting for me to board. I feel like Cinderella discovering her pumpkin had transformed into a chariot. Although it feels like a fairytale, I must have a ticket. So I rush to buy one. This is all too good to be true so I end up buying a 3-month pass! I board in disbelief and the doors close behind me. I don’t know what to appreciate first! That the doors have closed and I cannot fall out and die or that there are no posters or litter so far in the brand new compartment or the feel of the cool air that has filled the compartment which was once the battleground of noxious body odours.

Completely bewildered, my mind is spinning with all the how’s, what’s and when’s! I get a seat readily and without having to battle. The journey to Churchgate is magical and I have a smile plastered across my face all the way to the office. I make sure to board the AC local later that evening for the return journey. It is no less joyful than the morning’s. This is the best New Year gift I have ever received. The pass is a little more expensive than the first-class pass but I don’t mind about the minor difference. The benefits profoundly outweigh the costs.

I have completed a month and a half of using this AC service. I am thankful to Mumbai Railways for having finally introduced AC locals for Mumbaikars and giving us a choice to commute with safety, comfort, dignity and yes – pride. This has been a long time coming and some will say that it is two decades too late. But as we say in India – der aaiye, dorrust aaiye.

It’s a blessing for daily commuters like me who travel back and forth, north to south. It gives us all a sense of pride and belonging. Since my first ride, I have seen the exponential growth of passengers opting to travel by the AC local even if it means some of them having to adjust their work timings and daily routines. That is the value of safety and comfort to us Mumbaikars. This new wave of AC trains has forced behavioural changes among some citizens and inculcated a sense of respect and discipline for one another that is rooted in pride. Unlike the usual rush and crush approach, there is a sense of new-found discipline. Unfortunately, it is still business as usual in the regular trains. A strong indicator of pride and happiness felt by the commuters is the number of selfies they take as well as the smiles on people’s faces as they have relaxed conversations and get to know each other as they enjoy their daily ride.

Ashwini Thakar