

The Trust *Deficit*

Why no amount of money will fill the void — and what we must build instead.

THE ARGUMENT IN SIX SENTENCES

- 1 Indians' trust in one another more than halved in a single decade — the decade of the fastest economic ascent in the country's history — and has stayed at the floor ever since. §2
- 2 India ranks near the top of the world in confidence in its institutions and near the bottom in confidence in one another; whatever we have withdrawn, we have not withdrawn it from institutions. §3
- 3 Trust is not affection — it is a default setting on a calculation you would otherwise have to run, and running that calculation continuously is not a mood but a metabolic cost. §4
- 4 The material rush is not the cause of the trust deficit; it is the compensation for it. Money is the technology we have for not needing to trust anyone — which is exactly why a society losing trust reaches for it with both hands. §5
- 5 What predicts whether a neighbourhood holds is not warmth but willingness — whether ordinary people will actually intervene — organised in units small enough for that willingness to be visible. PART III
- 6 Indian community, left to organise itself, produces caste — so admitting by geography and refusing every other criterion is not a nicety of design but the load-bearing wall of it. OBJ. 4

17%

of Indians say most people can be trusted
(World Values Survey, 2022) — against 74% in
Denmark

22 pts

of trust lost between the 2004 and 2014 waves
— more than half of it, in one decade

3rd

of 28 countries on institutional trust (Edelman,
2025) — near the top of the world

871,000

deaths a year linked to loneliness worldwide —
about a hundred every hour (WHO, 2025)

Prologue: A conversation with your grandmother

Ask your grandmother about the house she grew up in and she will tell you, almost without being asked, that the door was not locked.

She will tell you that a stranger could arrive at dusk and be given water, and a mat, and a place to sleep. That when a marriage had to be conducted and the family had no money to conduct it, the marriage happened anyway, because a hundred small hands appeared and did a hundred small things. That when a house was being built, people came. That children could be left with neighbours for a week while the parents went on pilgrimage, and nobody thought this remarkable enough to mention.

And then she will say the sentence that should stop us: *we had nothing, and we were happy.*

We hear this and we feel something contract in the chest. We recognise the loss even though we never had the thing. And the instinct is to build the whole argument on that feeling — to say: look how much we have gained materially and how much we have lost otherwise, look at the gated compound and the CCTV camera and the child who has never once walked to a neighbour's house alone.

I want to resist that instinct, and I want to explain why, because the explanation is the beginning of the argument rather than an interruption of it.

PART I

The Diagnosis

1. Why the feeling is not enough

In 2023, Adam Mastroianni and Daniel Gilbert published a study in *Nature* that ought to be read by everyone who has ever written a sentence beginning "society today."

They assembled 235 survey questions, asked between 1949 and 2020 across 59 nations and put to more than half a million people, all asking some version of: are people less kind, less honest, less decent than they used to be?

In 84% of the American surveys and 86% of the international ones, a majority said yes. In every one of the forty countries Pew surveyed on this, majorities called moral decline at least a moderately big problem.

And yet when the researchers turned to a separate body of questions — some twelve million responses asking people about the actual morality of those around them *right now*, their neighbours, their colleagues, the strangers they dealt with that week — those reports were **flat**. Stable across fifty-five years of American data. The year of the survey explained less than three-tenths of one percent of the variance.

So for more than half a century, across every conceivable political and economic condition, and replicated across 59 nations, human beings have reported a moral decline that the data cannot find. The authors call it "the illusion of moral decline," and they propose a mechanism that is uncomfortable in its simplicity: we are exposed

disproportionately to bad news about the present, and we remember the past with the bad parts faded out. Biased exposure, biased memory. The two together manufacture a golden age that recedes at exactly the speed we walk toward it.

I am not going to build an argument on your grandmother's memory. Not because she is lying — she is not — but because the honest position is that her memory is not admissible as evidence, and neither is mine, and neither is yours.

What I am going to build the argument on is a number that is not a memory. A number that was measured, the same way, by the same instrument, at six points across thirty years, by people who were not trying to prove anything about India.

2. The number

The World Values Survey has, since the early 1990s, asked people in dozens of countries a single question: *generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?*

It is a crude question. It is also the closest thing the social sciences have to a thermometer for the thing this essay is about. Here is India's reading, wave by wave:

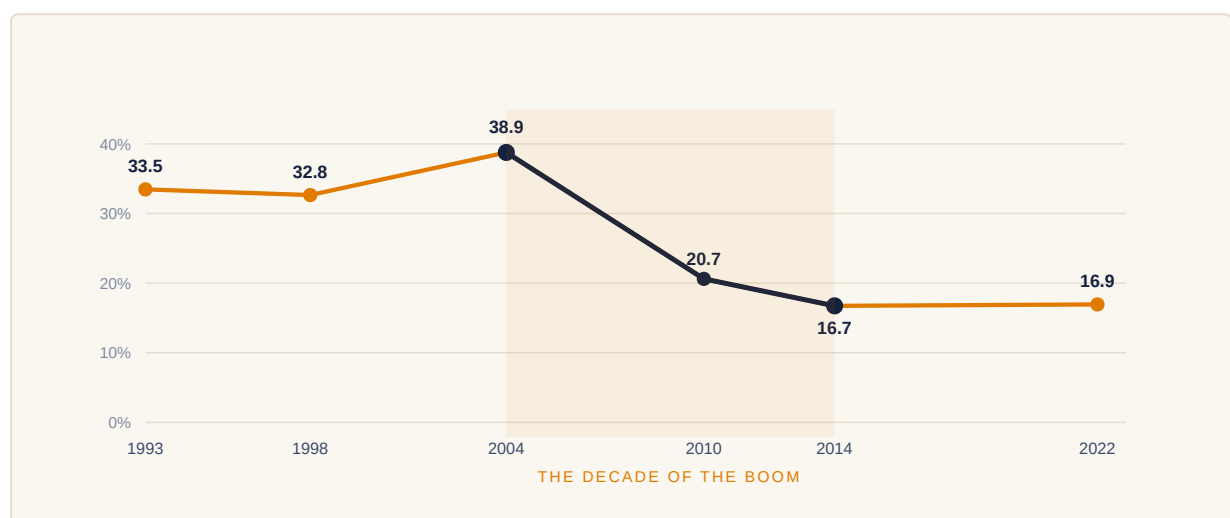


FIGURE 1 — INDIA'S TRUST, WAVE BY WAVE

Share of Indian respondents saying "most people can be trusted." Between the 2004 and 2014 waves the figure fell by more than half. Source: Integrated Values Surveys / World Values Survey, waves 1993–2022, processed by Our World in Data.

Table 1. Indians saying "most people can be trusted," by World Values Survey wave. The 2004–2014 fall is 22.2 percentage points.

SURVEY WAVE	INDIANS SAYING "MOST PEOPLE CAN BE TRUSTED"
1993	33.5%
1998	32.8%
2004	38.9%
2010	20.7%
2014	16.7%
2022	16.9%

SOURCE AND NOTE

Integrated Values Surveys / World Values Survey, waves 1993–2022, processed by Our World in Data.

Question wording: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" Figures are the share selecting "most people can be trusted."

Read that column again. Between the 2004 wave and the 2014 wave — one decade, the decade of India's fastest economic ascent — the proportion of Indians who believed most people could be trusted **fell by more than half**. Twenty-two percentage points, gone. And it has not recovered since. It has simply stayed at the floor.

This is not nostalgia. Nobody was asked to remember anything. Each cohort was asked about the present, and each successive cohort reported a present in which fewer people could be trusted than the last cohort had found.

For scale, here is where that leaves us in the 2022 wave:

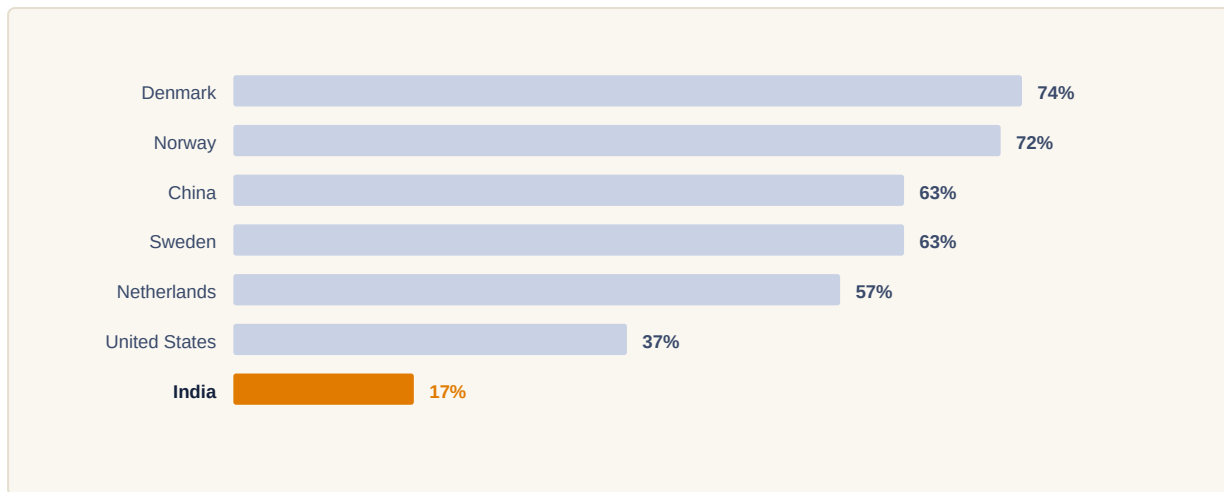


FIGURE 2 — WHERE THAT LEAVES INDIA

Share saying most people can be trusted, 2022 wave. We are not in the middle of this table. Source: World Values Survey / Our World in Data.

We are not in the middle of that table. We are near the bottom of it, and we arrived there recently, and we arrived there fast, and we arrived there during the boom.

One warning, before anyone quotes the 17% at me. Trust figures are extraordinarily sensitive to how the question is worded and who is asked. Pew's 2025 survey, using a binary wording, put India nearer 38%. An Ipsos online panel in 2022 put it at 56%. A WHO study across six Indian states in 2007–10 also found 56%. Pew is explicit that "there is no universally accepted way to measure social trust, and different measures obtain different results" — using the classic wording, 34% of Americans trust; using a binary, 55% of the same population does.

So the *level* is not a fact about India. It is a fact about an instrument. What I rely on is not the level but the **trend**, and I rely on the World Values Survey specifically because it is the only series that has asked Indians the same question in the same way over thirty years. A survey artefact does not usually halve itself in one decade and then hold flat for eight years.

3. The Indian asymmetry

Now hold that beside a second fact, because the two together are the most interesting thing I know about this country.

The Edelman Trust Barometer, which measures trust in institutions — government, business, media, NGOs — placed India **third out of twenty-eight countries** in 2025, with an index of 75, behind only China and Indonesia. On institutional trust, India is near the top of the world.

I want to be careful here, because these two surveys measure different things by different methods, and Edelman's India sample is an online panel skewed urban and affluent. They are not two readings of the same dial, and the comparison is suggestive rather than decisive. But even allowing generously for all of that, the shape is too stark to ignore:

*Indians have high confidence in their institutions
and low confidence in one another.*

THE INDIAN ASYMMETRY

It matters enormously, and here is why. If the diagnosis were "Indians have become cynical about everything," the prescription would be one thing. But that is not what the numbers show. Whatever confidence Indians have withdrawn, they have not withdrawn it from the idea of collective institutions.

What has thinned is something far more local and far more particular: **the working assumption that the specific human being in front of you will not take advantage of you.**

That is not general cynicism. It is something narrower and more treatable. It is the loss of a default.

4. What trust actually is, and why its loss registers so deep

I want to be precise about what is being lost, because "trust" is a word that has been worn smooth by overuse.

Trust is not affection. You can love someone you cannot trust and trust someone you do not love. Trust is not optimism about human nature. Trust is a **default setting on a calculation you would otherwise have to run.**

When you trust, you stop computing. You hand over the money without the paperwork. You leave the child without the arrangements. You accept the mat and the water without wondering what is wanted in return. Every one of those is a computation not performed, and the sum of all the computations you do not have to perform is the thing your grandmother was describing when she said she was happy with nothing.

Reverse it, and you get the modern condition. If I must assume that the person in front of me may be extracting from me, then I have to stay alert. Not occasionally — continuously. Alert at the shop, alert in the contract, alert with the contractor, alert with the school, alert with the neighbour whose name I have not learnt.

Continuous alertness is not a mood. It is a metabolic cost. It is the body's threat-detection system left switched on in a situation it was designed to handle in bursts. And a system built for bursts, run continuously, does what any system does under that treatment: it wears.

This is the point at which the argument stops being sociology and becomes medicine, and as a physician it is the part I find hardest to look away from.

Julianne Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues have twice pooled the world's evidence on this. In 2010, across 148 studies and 308,849 people followed for an average of seven and a half years, they found that people with stronger social relationships had a **50%**

greater likelihood of survival — and for the richer, multidimensional measures of social integration, 91%. In 2015, across 70 prospective studies and **3.4 million people**, they found social isolation associated with a 29% increased likelihood of mortality, loneliness 26%, living alone 32%.

Crucially, that second study found **no meaningful difference between objective isolation and subjective loneliness**. It is not only about how many people are around you. It is about whether you experience yourself as held.

In June 2025, the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Connection published its first flagship report and put a number on it: **871,000 deaths a year linked to loneliness** — about a hundred every hour. One in six people worldwide affected. And a detail that should interest us more than any other: loneliness runs at roughly **24% in low-income countries against 11% in high-income ones**. Twice as high where there is less money.

I use the WHO's own word: *linked*. Not caused. This is association, not proof of mechanism. But the association is large, it is replicated, and it points in one direction.

And one Indian figure complicates the picture, so let me put it here rather than bury it. The Longitudinal Ageing Study in India, surveying 30,394 people aged sixty and above, found that **13.4% of Indian elderly report frequent loneliness** — lower than most Western estimates for the same age group, and well below the WHO's global figure for older adults. If the argument were that Indian elders are uniquely abandoned, this number would not support it. What the LASI data does show is what predicts loneliness once it occurs: having no social contacts roughly doubles the odds. The structure is still holding for most Indian elders. The question this essay is asking is how long that lasts, and what happens to the generation now being raised without it.

The word I keep returning to is **void** — because that is what it feels like from inside, and because it is not merely a psychological void. It is closer to what the older Indian traditions would have called an existential one: a gap not in your mood but in your footing. Something you stand on that is no longer there.

5. Why we reach for money, and why money cannot reach

Here is the mechanism I want to propose, and it is the centre of this essay.

The material rush is not the cause of the trust deficit. It is the compensation for it.

If I cannot rely on my neighbour, I must become self-sufficient. If I cannot rely on my extended family, I must insure myself. If I cannot rely on the community to see my children through, I must accumulate enough that my children need no one. Every rupee accumulated is a relationship rendered unnecessary — and that is precisely its appeal to a person who has learnt that relationships cannot be relied upon.

Money is the technology we have for not needing to trust anyone. Which is exactly why a society losing trust will reach for it with both hands.

And it half-works. That is the cruel part. It buys the security guard, the private school, the health insurance, the second house. It genuinely does substitute for a great deal of what community once provided. If it did not work at all, nobody would do it.

But there is a boundary, and the research has recently located it with unusual precision. I want to state this correctly, because it is the single most misquoted finding in popular writing on happiness.

In 2010, Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton found that emotional wellbeing rose with income up to about \$75,000 a year and then flattened. This became the famous line: *money stops buying happiness at \$75,000*.

In 2021, Matthew Killingsworth, sampling over a million real-time moments, found the opposite: happiness kept rising with log income, just as steeply above \$80,000 as below.

So in 2023 they did the honourable thing. Kahneman, Killingsworth and Barbara Mellers ran an **adversarial collaboration** — they sat down together with the data to find out who was wrong. The answer, published in *PNAS*, is more useful than either original finding:

For most people, **money keeps buying happiness**, indefinitely, and for the happiest group it even accelerates. The flattening is real but it appears **only in the least happy fifth or so of people** — for whom happiness rises with income to around \$100,000 and then stops dead.

Kahneman's own summary was that he might have got it right had he described his results in terms of *unhappiness* rather than happiness.

Sit with what that means. Money buys the removal of the miseries money can remove. It does that job very well, all the way up. But there is a residue of suffering in the least happy that income simply cannot touch — a suffering that keeps its shape no matter how much is spent on it.

That residue is where I would locate the void. Not everywhere. Not in every person. But precisely where the material solution runs out, and precisely where the loss of trust would be expected to sit.

The man who says "if I earn a little more I will finally be at ease" and earns it, and is not at ease, and concludes that the number must have been wrong — he is not making an arithmetic error. He is applying a working instrument to a problem outside its range.

FOUR TERMS THIS ESSAY DEPENDS ON

Generalised trust

The working assumption that the specific human being in front of you will not take advantage of you. Measured by the World Values Survey question on whether most

people can be trusted.

Bonding social capital

Robert Putnam's term for ties connecting people like one another — "a kind of sociological superglue." India has an abundance of it.

Bridging social capital

Putnam's term for ties that go across boundaries and "can generate broader identities and reciprocity" — "a sociological WD-40." India's scarcity is here.

Collective efficacy

Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls's measure: "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good." Not affection — willingness to act.

PART II

Six Objections

An argument that has not been attacked has not been tested. What follows are the six strongest cases against everything I have written above. I have not softened them.

Three of them have changed what I believe.

OBJECTION 1

You are nostalgic, and nostalgia is a documented illusion

Already conceded, in the first section, before the argument began. I do not rest anything on remembered virtue. The Mastroianni–Gilbert finding is real and it disqualifies most writing of this kind, including a good deal of writing I have admired.

RESPONSE

What survives it is the World Values Survey series, because it is a repeated contemporaneous measure rather than a retrospective one. Nobody in 2014 was asked to compare their world to 1993. They were asked about their own present, and they described a present with half the trust that the 1993 cohort had described in theirs.

WHERE I AM EXPOSED

This is the load-bearing wall of the essay. If that series were shown to be a survey artefact, I would have to withdraw the argument. It is the one place where I am genuinely exposed.

OBJECTION 2 · CONCESSION

If trust is collapsing, why is violence falling?

This is the objection I find hardest, and I have not seen anyone making my kind of argument answer it.

Over exactly the period in which India's measured trust halved, India's homicide rate **fell by 46%** — from 5.2 per 100,000 in 1993 to 2.8 in 2022. The same pattern holds over centuries in Europe: Italy went from a homicide rate of 71.7 in 1375 to 0.41 in 2022.

If declining trust produced social breakdown in any straightforward sense, this is not what the numbers would look like.

Worse, the standard explanation for the decline of violence — Norbert Elias's civilising process, popularised by Steven Pinker — credits precisely the forces I am inclined to be suspicious of: the centralised state, commerce, cosmopolitanism, the impersonal contract. Not the village. The *replacement* of the village.

RESPONSE

I think the honest answer is this, and it costs me something to say it. **What replaced interpersonal trust was institutional trust, and on the specific matter of not being killed, institutional trust works better.** A police force and a court system deliver physical safety more reliably than a village elder ever did, and they deliver it to people the village elder would have excluded.

So I must narrow my claim, and I do. I am not arguing that we are less safe. We are demonstrably safer. I am arguing that the institutional substitute, whatever else it achieves, does not do the thing that being personally held by people who know your name does — and that the deficit shows up not in the homicide statistics but in the mortality-from-isolation statistics, in the WHO's 871,000, in the residue that money cannot reach.

WHAT THIS LEAVES STANDING

Safety and belonging are not the same good. We have bought one and spent the other.

OBJECTION 3 · CONCESSION

The joint family did not collapse

I have said this from platforms. The data does not support it, and I will not say it again.

Census of India, nuclear families as a share of all families: **70.34% in 2001, 70.11% in 2011.** A decline of less than a quarter of a percentage point in a decade.

The scholarly synthesis by Chakravorty, Goli and James (2021), drawing on those two Censuses plus four rounds of the NFHS and the IHDS, adds the rest: households with multiple couples actually *rose* slightly, from 13.5% to 14.1%;

single-person households were essentially flat, 3.6% to 3.7%. Their conclusion is that Indian families "have not 'disintegrated' but have rather transformed in terms of their structure and composition" — and they add the line that should be engraved somewhere: the joint family **"held greater cultural importance than actual prevalence."**

There is an older and deeper version of this point. A.M. Shah argued half a century ago that the joint household was never the statistically dominant form at any single moment, and could not have been, for simple demographic reasons — mortality, the timing of births, the ordinary lifecycle of a household mean that only a minority are in the "joint" phase at any instant even where joint-family norms are universal.

So the picture I once carried — the big house emptying out — is wrong. Household structure in India is remarkably stable.

RESPONSE

But notice what this concession leaves standing, and what it actually sharpens. The house has the same number of people in it. Something else changed. What changed is not the *structure* of the household but the **density of obligation** running through and beyond it — how many people outside your walls have a claim on you and you on them.

That is much harder to measure than household size, and I should be honest that it is not directly measured. But it is the thing the trust series is picking up. **The family did not shrink. The circle around the family did.**

OBJECTION 4 · MUST BE ANSWERED FIRST

Ambedkar

This is the one that must be answered, and answered first, by anyone in India who proposes building community.

"What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?"

Ambedkar said this in the Constituent Assembly, arguing against making the village the constitutional unit of India and in favour of the individual. He had watched what the close-knit Indian community actually did to people it had decided were beneath it, and he concluded that the individual needed protection *from* community, not more of it.

He was right, and the evidence that he was right is not historical. It is current.

- **27% of Indian households admit to practising untouchability** — 30% rural, 20% urban. By caste: Brahmins 52%, OBCs 33%, forward castes 24%, Scheduled Castes 22%. This is from the India Human Development Survey, 42,152 households.
- **70% of Indians say most or all of their close friends are from their own caste.** 64% say it is very important to stop women in their community marrying outside the caste. (Pew, nearly 30,000 respondents.)

So when I say we should rebuild trust in communities, I have to face what Indian community, left to itself, has always meant. It has meant trust *inside* a boundary purchased at the price of contempt outside it. The doors were open — to some people. The stranger was given water — if he was the right kind of stranger.

RESPONSE

Here is where I want to be exact, because I have said a version of this before and said it too loosely. I have described caste as having originally been a trust-cluster that later curdled into oppression. I no longer think that framing is defensible. Whatever caste was, it has functioned for as long as we have records as a system of ranked exclusion, and describing its origins charitably does nothing for anyone alive today. The relevant fact is not what caste was. **The relevant fact is that caste is the default shape Indian community takes when nobody actively prevents it.**

And Robert Putnam gave us the vocabulary for why this matters, in a distinction that turns out to be the hinge of this entire essay.

Putnam separated **bonding** social capital — the ties that connect people like one another, which he called "a kind of sociological superglue" — from **bridging** social capital, which "goes across boundaries and can generate broader identities and reciprocity," and which he compared to "a sociological WD-40."

India does not have a bonding-capital deficit. India has one of the most intensively bonded societies on earth. Caste, sub-caste, community, region, language — the superglue is everywhere and it is holding.

What India lacks is bridging capital. And here is my own reading of why that is worse than simply having one good and not the other — Putnam does not make this argument, so treat it as mine and test it accordingly. I think dense bonding capital does not merely coexist with weak bridging capital; it actively suppresses it, because a boundary that produces solidarity on the inside is the same boundary that produces suspicion on the outside. It is one wall with two faces. On that reading the 17% figure and the 70%-same-caste-friends figure are not two separate problems. They are one problem seen from either side of a wall.

THEREFORE

Any community-building proposal in India that does not have an explicit, structural, enforced mechanism for crossing caste and religious lines is not a solution to the trust deficit. It is an accelerant. I will come back to what that mechanism must be, because it is the most important design decision in this entire essay.

OBJECTION 5

Dense communities are good for support and bad for opportunity

Mark Granovetter established in 1973 that new information — about jobs, about opportunities, about the world — travels through **weak** ties, not strong ones, because strong ties are embedded in closed clusters where everyone already knows what everyone else knows.

This was long treated as an elegant theory. In 2022 it was tested causally, at a scale that is difficult to comprehend: researchers exploited randomised variation in LinkedIn's "People You May Know" algorithm across **over 20 million users and 2 billion new connections**, and confirmed that weak ties causally increase job mobility. With a refinement that matters: the relationship is an inverted U. *Moderately* weak ties help most — not the weakest, not the strongest.

RESPONSE

A dense, self-selected residential community of the kind I am arguing for is, in network terms, a redundant cluster. Everyone knows the same things. The prediction is clear and I accept it: **such a community will be excellent for support and poor for opportunity**, and the people who pay that cost will be the young.

This is a real price and I will not pretend otherwise. It shapes design: any such community must be deliberately porous, must import outsiders continuously,

and must treat the outward connections of its young people as a first-order obligation rather than a leakage to be regretted.

OBJECTION 6 · PARTIAL CONCESSION

High-trust societies got there through institutions, not villages

Bo Rothstein and Eric Uslaner examined why some societies are high-trust and concluded that the causes are **economic equality and equality of opportunity delivered through impartial universal institutions** — and, pointedly against Putnam, that participation in voluntary associations "has not stood up well against empirical tests." They report that none of their four measures of voluntary activity survived statistical testing. They note acidly that of Putnam's seven recommendations for rebuilding social capital, none concerned increasing equality of any kind.

Their finding: **means-tested welfare reduces trust; universal programmes increase it.**

And Yann Algan and Pierre Cahuc showed something even more sobering. By measuring trust among the American-born descendants of immigrants from twenty-four countries, wave by wave, they built a measure of inherited trust immune to reverse causality — and found that trust is transmitted across generations and has large causal effects on national income. If Russia had Sweden's inherited trust, its GDP per capita would be an estimated 69% higher.

The sobering part for me is the *inherited*. Trust moves on a generational timescale. The idea that you can convene people and manufacture it in five years is not supported by anything in this literature.

So Denmark's 74% is not the product of Danish villages. It is the product of centuries of accumulated inheritance plus impartial institutions plus low inequality.

RESPONSE

I concede the mechanism and dispute the exclusivity. Impartial institutions and local trust are complements operating at different scales, not substitutes. And on the institutional side India is, by every available measure, not short of confidence. What it does not have is the thing no institution can supply at any level of quality: **someone who will notice if your child does not come home.**

PART III

What Actually Works

Six objections in, the thesis I started with has been cut down considerably. Here is what remains standing, and I believe every word of it is defensible:

WHAT SURVIVES

Trust in India is real, measurable, has halved within one generation, and sits at 17% on the one instrument that has tracked it consistently. Its absence has consequences that money demonstrably cannot buy off. But trust does not appear to come from proximity, from affection, from shared identity, or from nostalgia. Where we find it, it sits alongside impartial rules, reliably enforced, at a scale where the enforcement is visible — and Indian community, left to organise itself, produces caste.

I should be careful with that formulation. The evidence below is associational and observational: it tells us what high-trust communities look like, not that copying their features will manufacture trust. But it is the best guidance available, and it is remarkably consistent.

The finding that changes everything: it is not warmth, it is willingness

In 1997, Robert Sampson, Stephen Raudenbush and Felton Earls published a study in *Science* that I regard as the most important single piece of evidence in this whole field. They surveyed 8,782 residents across 343 Chicago neighbourhood clusters, and they measured something they named **collective efficacy**: "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good."

A two-standard-deviation increase in collective efficacy was associated with a **39.7% reduction in the expected homicide rate**. And it partially mediated the association between concentrated disadvantage and violence — much of what looked like an effect of poverty ran through it.

Now read the definition again and notice what is in it. Not affection. Not friendship. Not shared background. Not how much the neighbours like each other.

Willingness to intervene.

The variable that predicts whether a neighbourhood is safe is whether an adult who sees a child doing something dangerous will actually say something. Whether someone will step in. Whether the norm is enforced by ordinary people in ordinary moments.

This should reorganise how we think about community entirely. The warm community of the imagination — everyone friendly, everyone eating together, everyone fond of

one another — is not what the data rewards. What the data rewards is a community where **people act**. Where standards are held by anyone present rather than delegated to an authority. Where intervention is normal and unremarkable and not experienced as interference.

Your grandmother's village was not safe because everyone loved each other. It was safe because if you did something you shouldn't, seven adults who were not your parents would deal with you before sundown.

ON COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

Ostrom's eight, and the one that matters most

Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel in economics for demonstrating that communities *can* govern shared resources without either privatisation or state control — but only under identifiable conditions. Her eight design principles, from *Governing the Commons* (1990):

1 Clearly defined boundaries

Who is in, and what is being governed

2 Congruence

Between the rules and local conditions, and between what you take and what you contribute

3 Collective-choice arrangements

Those affected by the rules can change the rules

4 Monitoring

By people accountable to the members, or by the members themselves

5 Graduated sanctions

Proportionate to the seriousness and context of the offence

6 Conflict-resolution mechanisms

Rapid, low-cost, local

7 Minimal recognition of rights to organise

The state does not obstruct

8 Nested enterprises

Larger systems built as layers of smaller ones

A review of 91 empirical studies found these principles well supported. Note that four of the eight — monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict resolution, collective choice — are about **enforcement and rule-making**. Ostrom's communities do not run on goodwill. They run on visible, proportionate, locally-owned accountability. This is exactly Sampson's willingness-to-intervene, formalised.

And the eighth principle is the answer to a question I have been getting wrong.

The 500-family question, answered honestly

I have spoken about clusters of five hundred families who all know each other. I now think that specific formulation is not achievable, and it is worth explaining precisely why, because the correction improves the idea rather than abandoning it.

Robin Dunbar's work maps human social networks in layers, each roughly three times the one inside it: **5** intimates, **15** close friends, **50** good friends, **150** friends, **500** acquaintances, **1,500** faces you can name.

Five hundred families is somewhere above two thousand people. **That exceeds every layer, including the outermost.** A resident of such a settlement could not put a name to every face, let alone hold mutual obligation with them. And note what the 500 layer is actually labelled: *acquaintances*. People you recognise. Not people you trust.

(I should add, in fairness, that Dunbar's specific number 150 has been seriously challenged — a 2021 analysis in *Biology Letters* re-ran his method and found confidence intervals so wide that "specifying any one number is futile." The layered *structure* is well observed in real contact data. The precise figures are not laws of nature. I use them as orders of magnitude, not constants.)

There is better evidence anyway, and it comes from watching actual cooperation rather than inferring a cognitive ceiling. Yang and colleagues, publishing in *PNAS* in 2013, tracked forest-monitoring groups in China's Wolong Nature Reserve and found that group size has **nonlinear** effects: "intermediate group size contributing the most monitoring effort and leading to the biggest forest cover gain." Too small fails. Too large fails. Intermediate wins. What made the intermediate groups work: punishing free riding, within-group enforcement, social capital among members, and self-selection at formation.

So the answer is not to abandon the number. **The answer is to nest it.**

A cluster of five hundred families should be built as roughly **thirty-family units of some twenty to forty households each** — small enough that everyone genuinely knows everyone, that a missing child is noticed within the hour, that free-riding is visible — **federated upward** into the larger body which handles what small units cannot: capital, external representation, standards, dispute escalation.

This is Ostrom's eighth principle. And it is not theoretical. It is how the most successful community institutions in India are already built.

Two Indian proofs

KERALA · SINCE 1998

Kudumbashree

Three tiers. At the base, Neighbourhood Groups of 10 to 20 women from economically weaker families, meeting weekly, with five elected office-bearers each and savings recycled as loans among members. These federate into Area Development Societies at ward level, and those into Community Development Societies at the panchayat or municipal level.

GUJARAT · GCMMF

Amul

The same shape: village dairy cooperative societies → eighteen district unions → the state federation, with 3.6 million farmer members across 18,600 villages, ₹65,911 crore of revenue in FY2024-25, and three hundred lakh litres of milk collected daily. The world's largest farmer-owned dairy business — and its organisational unit is still the village society.

Ten to twenty households at the Kudumbashree base is well inside Dunbar's fifty-person layer, with elected accountability and nesting upward through two more tiers. This is Ostrom's architecture implemented at state scale in India, and it has run for twenty-eight years.

Neither of these is an intentional community, a spiritual settlement, or a philosophy. Both are federations of small accountable units doing concrete work together. That is the form that has actually worked in this country, at scale, for decades.

AND ONE INDIAN CAUTION

Auroville was founded in 1968 with a design population of 50,000. In 2025 it has approximately 3,300 residents. Fifty-seven years, and it has reached about 6.6% of its intended size, with governance disputes that have consumed much of its recent history.

I hold no view on Auroville's merits. I raise it for one reason: the binding constraint on communities built around ideals is almost never the quality of the ideal. **It is governance.** And a broader study of 215 intentional communities found that the strongest predictor of member satisfaction was not shared belief, not income sharing, not any of the classic commitment mechanisms — those failed replication entirely. It was **egalitarian decision-making structures**. How decisions get made beats what everyone believes. (That study surveyed only communities still living, so it cannot tell us what killed the ones that died — a limitation worth holding in mind, since the ones that died are the more instructive sample.)

Build the constitution before the campus.

What Rebuild India and ARISE Are Actually Doing

I have spent most of this essay dismantling the loose version of my own argument. Now let me say what survives, and what it means for the work our movement is doing — because I think the evidence endorses a good deal of what **ARISE** already does, and demands changes in some of it.

What the evidence endorses

The neighbourhood unit is the right unit. Sampson's finding is a *neighbourhood* finding. Collective efficacy is measured and matters at the scale of a few hundred metres. ARISE's Nurture Centres are neighbourhood institutions serving the children of the streets around them. That is where the evidence says the effect lives.

The scale is already close to correct — and it is correct precisely because it is not five hundred families. ARISE's own description of the model is "fifty associates, formed in one home, carry free evening education to about a hundred children of their own community." Twenty-five associates constitute a club; fifty is the target. So a mature club and its centre is a body of roughly a hundred and fifty people — Dunbar's friendship layer, almost exactly. Small enough for everyone to be known, large enough to do real work. The evidence does not support two thousand people knowing one another. It supports something very close to what is already built.

The structure is already nested. Centre → club → foundation is Ostrom's eighth principle. What Kudumbashree does with neighbourhood groups, area societies and community societies, ARISE does with centres, clubs and the foundation. This is not a coincidence of design; it is convergent evolution toward the only architecture that works.

Open enrolment is the answer to Ambedkar, and it is the most important thing in the whole design. ARISE's own rule for the Nurture Centres is that "a child simply

comes" — *no test, no fee, no form of selection and no minimum commitment.*

Enrolment is by geography and school stage — classes 6 to 10 — and nothing else.

I want to be emphatic about how much rests on that clause, because I do not think it has been understood as the load-bearing principle it is.

Every filter you add — a fee, an entrance test, a recommendation, an interview, a form requiring documents — becomes, in Indian conditions, a caste filter and a class filter, whether or not anyone intends it. Selection is how bonding capital reproduces itself. **A centre that admits by geography and refuses every other criterion is a bridging-capital machine**, and it may be the only kind of bridging-capital machine that can be built cheaply and at scale in this country.

It puts a Brahmin child and a Dalit child in the same room on the same bench with the same teacher and the same expectation, every evening, for years, because they live on the same street. Against the 27% and the 70%, that is not a soft intervention. It is close to the only structural one available.

The child protection architecture is Ostrom's principles 4, 5 and 6. Screened mentors, the two-adult rule, attendance called at arrival and departure, children released only to named guardians, external reporting routes that bypass internal hierarchy. This reads as safeguarding, and it is. But it is also **monitoring, sanction and conflict resolution made visible** — and Ostrom's evidence says that visible enforcement is not a constraint on trust. It is trust, in its only durable form. The households that send their children are not extending faith. They are observing a rule being kept, every evening.

The zero-fee rule removes money from the relationship. Given everything in Part I about money as the substitute for trust, an institution in which no transaction occurs between the people involved is doing something structurally important, not merely generous.

The Balasabha may be the single most undervalued element. The children's own Friday assembly — "convened, chaired and run by them, with the associates present but not in charge" — is collective-choice arrangement (Ostrom's third principle) taught to eleven-year-olds. And recall the intentional-communities finding: egalitarian decision-making structures beat every other predictor of whether a community holds together. If you want a generation capable of self-governance, this is where it is learnt, and it is learnt by doing rather than by being told.

Four things I think must change

- 1 **Stop saying the joint family collapsed.** It did not. Census 2001 to 2011: 70.34% to 70.11%. The claim is false and it is easily checked, and every time we make it we hand a critic a free win on a point that is not even necessary to the argument. The true claim is stronger and more interesting: household structure held while the circle of obligation around the household thinned. Say that instead.

- 2 **Retire the charitable account of caste's origins.** I have offered it and I was wrong to. It gains nothing and it costs the movement its standing with exactly the people whose participation would prove the model works. The defensible position is sharper: caste is what Indian community becomes by default when nothing prevents it, which is why open enrolment is not a nicety but the core of the design.

- 3 **Measure collective efficacy, not just attendance.** Sampson's instrument exists and is well validated. A short survey in the streets around each centre — would a neighbour intervene if children were skipping school, if there was a fight, if something was being damaged; can you count on people here — administered at the start and again after two years, would tell us whether the

centres are producing the thing we claim. Hours taught and children enrolled measure effort. Collective efficacy measures the outcome. **And it is the difference between an inspiring movement and a demonstrated one.**

4

Take the weak-ties cost seriously — with one honest qualification. A child educated by the same associates on the same street for five years is receiving support and, in network terms, redundancy. Granovetter and the LinkedIn experiment both say opportunity arrives from outside. The centres should deliberately import strangers — visiting professionals from other cities and other fields, exchanges between centres in different districts, structured outward introductions for every child leaving Class 10.

The qualification, which cuts against me and which I include because leaving it out would be exactly the selectivity this essay claims to avoid: the same LinkedIn study found that **weak ties help most in digital industries, while strong ties help more in low-technology sectors.** Many of the children in our centres will enter precisely those low-technology sectors, where the dense local network may serve them better than distant acquaintances would. So this recommendation is a hedge against an uncertain future rather than a correction of a known error. Warmth is what a centre supplies naturally; reach must be engineered — but engineered as an option offered, not a destination assumed.

The claim I think is genuinely defensible

Here is the sentence I would be willing to defend against any critic:

THE DEFENSIBLE CLAIM

India's confidence in its institutions ranks near the top of the world, while its measured interpersonal trust has halved in a generation and ranks near the bottom. The country has kept faith in its systems and lost it in its neighbours. Systems can deliver safety, growth and law — and India's falling homicide rate proves they have. What no system has been shown to deliver is the experience of being personally held. Where that exists, it exists at neighbourhood scale, sustained by visible mutual obligation — and in India it will only be worth building if the rules that govern it are impartial enough to include the people that Indian community instinctively excludes.

That is a narrow claim. It is much narrower than the one I began with. And I think it is true, and I think almost nothing else in Indian public life is currently attempting it.

Epilogue: The door

I began with your grandmother's unlocked door and I said I would not build an argument on it. I have kept that promise. Every load-bearing claim above rests on a measurement rather than a memory.

But let me return to the door, because now we can say what it actually was.

The open door was not a sign of a gentler people. Those people practised untouchability, married their daughters inside the caste, and enforced a hierarchy that Ambedkar spent his life fighting. The door was open to some and shut absolutely to others, and there were people for whom no door in that village would ever open.

The open door was a **piece of infrastructure**. It signified that the cost of one person's misbehaviour would be borne by that person immediately, visibly, and locally, because enough people were watching and enough of them would act. It was Sampson's

collective efficacy three generations before anyone measured it. It was Ostrom's monitoring and graduated sanctions with no committee and no minutes.

We did not lose the door because we became worse people. We lost it because we scaled past the point where watching worked, and we replaced watching with locks, and with insurance, and with money — and those substitutes are genuinely better at some things and completely incapable of others.

The task is not to go back. There is nothing to go back to that any of us should want. The past was less safe than we remember, far less inclusive than we admit, and the trust it did contain was rationed by birth.

The task is to build, deliberately and from nothing, the thing the old village produced by accident — small enough to be seen, accountable enough to be trusted, and **open enough to include the people the old village would have turned away.**

That is what a Nurture Centre is, when it works. Fifty young people who know a hundred children by name, on the handful of streets they all share, holding a standard that any of them will enforce, and admitting every child who walks in without asking a single question about who their parents are.

It is not a village. It is better than a village, because it is chosen and it is open.

And if there is a hundred of them, that is a district. If there is one on every campus in India, that is something no policy can purchase and no amount of money can substitute for.

*We do not need to be trusted by the world. We
need to be trustworthy to the street.*

THE TRUST DEFICIT

Questions this essay answers

THE SHORT VERSIONS

How much has trust in India actually fallen? —

On the World Values Survey — the only instrument that has asked Indians the same question in the same way for thirty years — the share saying "most people can be trusted" went from 38.9% in the 2004 wave to 16.7% in 2014, and stood at 16.9% in 2022. That is a fall of more than half in one decade, and it happened during the decade of India's fastest economic ascent. Denmark records 74%, Norway 72%, China 63%, the United States 37%.

Isn't this just nostalgia for a golden age that never existed? +

If trust is collapsing, why is violence falling? +

Did the Indian joint family collapse? +

Doesn't building community in India just rebuild caste? +

What does the evidence say actually rebuilds trust? +

How large should a community unit be? +

If money cannot fill the void, what is money actually doing? +

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EVERY STATISTIC IS TRACEABLE TO A NAMED SOURCE AND YEAR

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ARISE AND REBUILD INDIA

[arise.net.in](#) · [rebuildindia.org.in](#) · [drvarunmurthy.com](#)

A note on evidence

CONFIDENCE AND LIMITATIONS

Every statistic in this essay is traceable to a named source and year, and this essay was fact-checked against those sources line by line before publication. Five points deserve explicit flagging:

- ▶ India's Pew 2025 trust figure and the exact fieldwork parameters of WVS Wave 7 for India could not be verified from primary sources and are therefore not used as load-bearing claims.
- ▶ The Ambedkar quotation is confirmed present in the Constituent Assembly Debates archive; the near-universal attribution to 4 November 1948 is second-hand here.
- ▶ A.M. Shah's argument on joint-household prevalence is reported in its standard characterisation rather than from the primary text.
- ▶ "Density of obligation," the concept doing the work in the response to Objection 3, is not directly measured by any dataset I am aware of. It is an inference from the trust series, and it is the weakest link in the chain. **Anyone wishing to refute this essay should start there.**
- ▶ The claim that dense bonding capital actively suppresses bridging capital is my own reasoning, not Putnam's, and is flagged as such in the text.

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TOPICS

Social trust

Community

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