



The Role of Social and Digital Media in National Security - Part - 2

By Uday Kumar Varma

Author is a former Secretary, Information and Broadcasting, GOI

Global Responses to Digital Threats

Countries worldwide have recognized the importance of addressing the challenges posed by social and digital media. A range of strategies has been employed to regulate platforms, counter disinformation, and strengthen national security:

- **United States:** The U.S. has enacted laws such as the Foreign Agents Registration Act to counter foreign interference and established specialized cyber commands to address digital threats. Efforts have also focused on holding tech companies accountable for the spread of harmful content.
- **European Union:** The EU's Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act aim to combat disinformation, enhance platform accountability, and ensure transparency. These regulations set a global standard for tech governance.
- **China:** China employs strict internet controls and AI-powered surveillance to manage domestic narratives while simultaneously conducting influence campaigns abroad. This dual approach allows China to maintain internal stability and project power internationally.
- **Australia:** Australia's Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material law compels social media companies to swiftly remove harmful content, reflecting a growing global emphasis on timely and effective responses to digital threats.
- **India:** India has amended its IT Rules to mandate accountability from social media platforms. Provisions include identifying the originators of harmful content and ensuring swift responses to government demands, demonstrating its proactive stance in digital governance.

Despite these measures, the absence of cohesive international norms limits the effectiveness of individual efforts. Global cooperation remains essential for addressing the transnational nature of digital threats.

India's Vulnerabilities and Strategic Imperatives

India, with its diverse population, ethnic complexities, and geopolitical challenges, is uniquely susceptible to the adverse effects of social and digital media. Hostile actors often exploit these vulnerabilities to disseminate disinformation, deepen social divisions, and incite unrest. A three-pronged approach encompassing regulatory frameworks, technological innovation, and public awareness is essential for mitigating these threats and strengthening India's digital resilience.

Strengthening Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

India has made strides in regulating its digital ecosystem through laws like the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. However, as the digital landscape evolves, these frameworks must be continually adapted:

- **Enhancing Platform Accountability:** Current regulations focus on holding platforms responsible for harmful content. However, they must also ensure a balance between freedom of expression and national security to prevent overreach.
- **Countering Cross-Border Interference:** Legislation must address the growing threat of foreign influence campaigns. This includes creating mechanisms to counteract transnational disinformation networks and building international partnerships.
- **Addressing Emerging Threats:** Swift regulatory responses to challenges like deepfakes, AI-generated disinformation, and cyberattacks are crucial for staying ahead of adversaries.

By prioritizing transparency and fairness, India can create a legal environment that safeguards both its democratic values and national security.

Leveraging Technology for Security

Technological advancements offer significant opportunities to counter the misuse of social and digital media. India must invest in cutting-edge solutions to bolster its defences:

- **AI-Powered Tools:** Developing algorithms capable of detecting disinformation, monitoring social media trends, and neutralizing bot-driven campaigns is vital. Indigenous innovations tailored to India's unique challenges can provide a significant advantage.
- **Enhanced Cybersecurity:** Strengthening institutions like CERT-In (Indian Computer Emergency Response Team) and collaborating with private sector entities will enhance India's ability to detect and mitigate cyber threats.
- **Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT):** Proactively leveraging OSINT tools to analyse public data can help anticipate threats and craft effective countermeasures.

Through the strategic use of technology, India can address both the present and emerging challenges in the digital domain.

Promoting Media Literacy and Public Awareness

The most critical component of India's strategy is fostering a digitally literate and responsible citizenry. Educating individuals about the risks of disinformation and the importance of responsible online behaviour is essential. Some such measures may include,

- **Media Literacy Programmes:** Embedding digital literacy into school curricula and community outreach initiatives will equip citizens with the skills needed to navigate the digital landscape.
- **National Awareness Campaigns:** Initiatives like Cyber Swachhata Kendra (Cyber Hygiene Centre) should be expanded to address misinformation, cyberbullying, and online safety comprehensively.
- **Engaging Civil Society and Influencers:** Collaborating with trusted voices from civil society, academia, and media can amplify messages promoting responsible digital behaviour.

An informed and vigilant population is the first line of defence against the misuse of social and digital media.

India's Role in Shaping the Global Digital Order

As India asserts itself on the global stage, it has an opportunity to lead in establishing norms and ethical guidelines for the digital age.

Engaging in international forums to advocate for transparency, accountability, and cooperation is vital for addressing the transnational nature of digital threats. Partnerships with like-minded democracies can strengthen collective efforts to combat cyberattacks, disinformation, and other challenges.

Additionally, India's growing technological expertise positions it to set an example in harnessing digital tools responsibly. By integrating its domestic strategies with global initiatives, India can contribute to creating a safer and more equitable digital ecosystem.

National Security: A Collective Responsibility

India's path forward in the digital age requires a concerted effort across all sectors—government, technology, civil society, and individuals. Laws must provide the framework, technology must act as the enabler, and public awareness must serve as the bulwark against the misuse of digital media.

The stakes are high. India's diversity and democratic ethos are its greatest strengths, but they also make it vulnerable to manipulation. To preserve these values while securing its sovereignty, India must embrace this three-pronged strategy with urgency and resolve. India, to safeguard her own security and interest, and to be able to effectively foster international leadership, must embrace the new strategies with urgency, energy, and finesse, even a certain degree of ruthlessness. A few voices of orchestrated and vested opposition must not weaken or deter her from securing her stability and accelerating her progress.

The integration of social and digital media into national security strategies is both an opportunity and a challenge. In this era where conflicts are increasingly shaped by bytes rather than bullets, mastering the digital realm is not just a necessity—it is an imperative. For India, the path forward lies in transforming its vulnerabilities into strengths and using the digital battleground as an arena for progress, unity, and leadership.

Ouster of Bashar Assad Regime in Syria: What Next?

By Vappala Balachandran

The author is Former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat

The mystery of who backed the lightning advance of Syrian opposition forces led by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani of the former al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), resulting in the unexpected toppling of Bashar Hafez al-Assad of Syria reminds me of a similar conundrum in 2013. That was on the origins of the dreaded Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) which suddenly burst into the scene in April that year by organising 40 synchronised attacks in various cities in Iraq. In June 2014 Mosul fell to them.

Many theories were advanced during that period on who had put together this coalition, which was also called Al-Qaeda of Iraq (AQI). On 24 February 2012 the conservative "World Net Daily" (WND), a US right wing news portal published a piece "Middle East War in March" by Aaron Klein, its Jerusalem Bureau Chief saying that NATO countries were running a training base for the Syrian rebels in the Jordanian town of Safawi in the country's northern desert region.

Well before Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had blamed Saudi Arabia, WND had made dramatic disclosures about Saudi Arabia's involvement. Maliki had said on 17 June 2012 that the Kingdom was "responsible for what these groups are receiving in terms of financial and moral support".

WND had blamed Saudi Arabia for “arming the ISIS” and that “the Saudis are a driving force in supporting the al-Qaida-linked group...The sources said the Saudi kingdom is supporting the Iraqi jihadists, particularly ISIS, in a bid to offset Iranian dominance in Iraq and the region and to gain a Sunni stronghold in the strategic area”.

On 16 June 2014 Michael Maloof, former security policy analyst in the US Department of Defense alleged that Obama administration was aware that ISIS was training its fighters in Turkey during the last two months. “One of the training centres was in the vicinity of Incirlik Air Base near Adana, Turkey, where American personnel and equipment are located”.

He quoted a Shiite source close to Maliki’s government saying that Turkey was annoyed with Iraq for their “interference in Ankara’s negotiations with the Kurds over oil and to extend its influence over Sunnis in Iraq”. The source told Maloof: “Riyadh, he said, had paid some \$3 billion to the jihadist group to overthrow Maliki. “Plan B” was to split Iraq into three states, for Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites”.

What will be the future of Syria? Will Syria split like Libya? Can the rebel constituents cohabit and co-govern? How much control can other powers like US, France, Turkey and Sunni Arab countries exercise over Syria? A recent Brookings analysis warned that other constituents of Syrian rebels like US backed Kurds and Turkey-supported Sunni Arabs who hold separate enclaves in Northern Syria will have difficulties in living alongside HTS with its “jihadist roots and al-Qaida baggage”. HTS has been ruling the Syrian province of Idlib, which it captured in 2019.

The fall of Syria is certainly a blow to Russia in its regional ambitions as it has been controlling its Middle East and African operations through its Tartus naval base and Khmeimim air base. Although initial reports had suggested that Russia was negotiating with HTS to keep these airbases, a December 14 report by Reuters, based on satellite images, suggested that it “was packing up its military equipment”.

Reuters also quoted Britain’s Channel 4 news reporting that a convoy of more than 150 Russian military vehicles were moving along a road. It said: “The Russian military was moving in good order and that it appeared there had been a deal struck to allow the Russians to exit Syria in an orderly fashion.”

Would this change-over lead to the implementation of a UN Action plan on a transitional government and elections unveiled by former Secretary General Kofi Annan on 30 June 2012? It is too early to say.

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International Basket Case Becomes Reality: Victory Day Anniversary and Bangladesh's Remarkable Journey

By Dr. Santhosh Mathew

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Victory Day holds profound significance for Bangladesh, marking its liberation and the triumph over the Pakistan Armed Forces in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Celebrated annually on December 16, the day symbolizes the birth of a sovereign state and the culmination of a long struggle for self-determination, where India played the pivotal role of midwife in the creation of the newest state in South Asia. The Bangladesh Liberation War was not merely a conflict confined to its borders but a defining moment in the geopolitics of the region.

The roots of this war were entrenched in the systemic neglect and exploitation of East Pakistan by the ruling elite of West Pakistan. Decades of economic disparity, cultural suppression, and political disenfranchisement laid the foundation for a movement demanding autonomy, which was catalyzed by the brutal military crackdown on March 25, 1971. Operation Searchlight unleashed a reign of terror that sought to silence the aspirations of millions but instead ignited a people's resistance. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the towering leader of the Awami League, became the symbol of this resistance. His leadership united the Bengali population, and his call for independence resonated with millions who yearned for freedom. As the conflict escalated, millions of refugees poured into India, creating a humanitarian crisis of unparalleled magnitude. India's intervention under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was both a strategic and moral decision. The Indian Armed Forces, working in coordination with the Mukti Bahini, mounted a joint operation that decisively defeated the Pakistani forces within a mere 13 days.

The surrender of the Pakistani military on December 16, 1971, in Dhaka is one of the most iconic moments in modern history. The image of General A.A.K. Niazi signing the Instrument of Surrender in the presence of Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora remains etched in the collective memory of both nations. This marked not only the liberation of Bangladesh but also a significant blow to the two-nation theory that had led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The emergence of Bangladesh was hailed globally, but it also underscored the complexities of international politics. The then-U.S. President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who had been staunch supporters of Pakistan due to Cold War dynamics, were caught off guard. Nixon's infamous remark about South Asia becoming an "international basket case" was a harsh reflection of the scepticism with which the new nation was viewed. Yet, Bangladesh defied the odds and began its journey toward self-reliance and growth. Over the past five decades, Bangladesh has transformed remarkably, earning the moniker "the garment factory of the world." The country has become a global hub for textile manufacturing, driving its economic growth and lifting millions out of poverty. This economic miracle is a testament to the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of its people. Despite initial challenges, including political instability, natural disasters, and infrastructural deficits, Bangladesh has managed to sustain an impressive growth trajectory.

Today, Bangladesh stands as a significant player in South Asia, with a GDP growth rate that often outpaces its neighbours. The country's success in achieving many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in areas such as gender equality, education, and healthcare, is commendable. It has become a model for other developing nations, showcasing how strategic planning and a focus on human development can lead to sustained progress. Victory Day is not just a celebration of past triumphs but also a moment to reflect on the challenges and opportunities ahead. The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has evolved significantly since 1971. Bangladesh's strategic location makes it a key player in the Bay of Bengal region, with increasing importance in global trade routes. The nation's relationships with neighbouring countries, particularly India and China, are critical in shaping its future. While the ties with India remain strong, underpinned by historical bonds and mutual interests, Bangladesh has also embraced China's Belt and Road Initiative, balancing its foreign policy to maximize economic benefits.

The legacy of 1971 also brings responsibilities. As the world's second-largest producer of garments, Bangladesh faces the challenge of ensuring fair labour practices and sustainable production methods in an era of growing environmental consciousness. The Rana Plaza tragedy of 2013 served as a grim reminder of the cost of neglecting workers' rights and safety. In response, the nation has made significant strides in improving factory conditions and implementing labour reforms, but the journey is far from over.

Victory Day also underscores the importance of remembering the sacrifices that led to Bangladesh's independence. The war claimed the lives of countless freedom fighters and civilians, whose bravery and resilience paved the way for a new nation.

The struggle for liberation also left deep scars, including the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military, which continue to evoke strong emotions. Efforts to bring justice through war crimes tribunals and to preserve the memory of the Liberation War are vital in honoring this legacy.

As Bangladesh celebrates another Victory Day, it does so as a nation that has defied expectations and charted its path to progress. The dreams of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Mukti Bahini have been realized in many ways, with a vibrant democracy, a thriving economy, and a resilient population. However, recent political instability has cast a shadow over Bangladesh's progress. The fall of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, after years of dominance, has left a power vacuum, fueling uncertainty and unrest. Political polarization has deepened, and concerns over democratic backsliding have surfaced. The status of minorities, particularly Hindus and indigenous groups, remains precarious, with reports of rising communal tensions and targeted violence. Ensuring minority rights and fostering inclusivity will be critical for Bangladesh to maintain its social fabric and democratic principles.

The anniversary of Victory Day is a reminder of the enduring spirit of a people who fought for their right to self-determination and emerged victorious against overwhelming odds. It is a celebration of freedom, a tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and a pledge to build a future worthy of their dreams. Bangladesh's story, from a war-torn newborn state to a thriving economy, stands as a beacon of hope and inspiration, not just for South Asia but for the world.

What Manipur Needs

By Prakash Singh

The Author was DGP Assam and also Director General of the Border Security Force.

Manipur is a classic example of how not to deal with an internal security problem. Not that it is a simple problem. It is an explosive cocktail of ethnic conflicts, tribal insurgency, drug trafficking, and infiltration from across the Myanmar border. The tragedy is that the problem is getting more complex with every passing month. Such a scenario is deeply unfortunate because the country has enormous expertise in dealing with diverse internal security challenges. We look back with pride that, in the past, we defeated one of the most lethal manifestations of terrorism in Punjab, that insurgency in the Northeast has generally been contained, that the Maoist rebellion is on its last legs and that cross-border terrorism in J&K has been kept well within limits.

What has gone wrong in Manipur? The Government of India is, unfortunately, treating the situation primarily as a law and order problem. There was a recrudescence of violence in the state recently. Our response has been to send 90 additional companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) to the state and impose the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in the jurisdiction of six police stations in the Valley areas, including at Jiribam. There are, as of date, a total of 288 CAPF companies (CRPF-165, BSF-104, RAF-8, SSB-6, ITBP-5) assisting the state police. In addition, there is the Assam Rifles, which is under the operational control of the Army. The state has been saturated with forces. However, what Manipur needs today is a healing touch. Unfortunately, there is hardly any meaningful political initiative and there are few confidence-building measures. And so, the state is sinking into an abyss.

It was on May 3, 2023, that ethnic violence erupted in Manipur between the Meiteis, a majority that lives in the Imphal Valley, and the Kuki-Zo tribals, who inhabit the surrounding Hills. So far, a total of 258 people are reported to have lost their lives in the internecine conflicts and more than 60,000 people have been displaced. A sinister aspect of these conflicts is that 386 religious structures were vandalised by the rioters.

Recently, tensions started building on November 11, when 10 militants of the Hmar tribe were reportedly killed in an encounter with the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)

personnel in the Jiribam district. The militants had attacked the CRPF and a nearby relief camp and allegedly abducted six persons of a Meitei family, three women and three children, who were all killed. On November 16, there were violent protests in Manipur during which houses of ministers and MLAs were attacked for the government's failure to curb the escalating violence. The very next day, the second-largest ally of the BJP-led Manipur government, the National People's Party, withdrew support for it for its failure to restore normalcy in the state. NPP leader and Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma expressed his distress over things going out of control and suggested that there should have been a change of guard in Imphal.

The Government of India seems to have forgotten the simplest of lessons in dealing with the tribal unrest. The primary concern should no doubt be to put down violence. This should, however, be quickly followed or even accompanied by an effort to address the grievances, find a middle ground, reconcile the differences, form peace committees at different levels, and take such political initiatives which convince the people of the government's sincerity and inspire confidence. There should be, what is called, the WHAM approach — winning hearts and minds. There were periods of lull in Manipur which could have been utilised to initiate a dialogue between the rival groups and come to some kind of modus vivendi. The Home Minister did make some efforts on these lines in the initial stages, but there was no proper follow-up.

The situation is quite grim and calls for drastic remedial measures without any further delay.

- The Prime Minister should visit Manipur at the earliest. The people of Manipur are in fact waiting for him and any initiative from his side is almost certain to be accepted by the warring factions.

- The PM should declare President's Rule in the state and send, as governor, a dynamic police or army officer of integrity who has experience in counter-insurgency, preferably someone who has served in the northeast.

- The administration would need to be completely revamped. There are senior officers who are more concerned about saving their skin rather than dealing fearlessly with situations which present formidable hazards. They will have to be replaced.

- It should be made clear to all and sundry that there would be no compromise on the integrity of Manipur.

- The unified command should go hammer and tongs against three groups of people irrespective of the community or tribe they belong to: Those indulging in or inciting violence; those trying to give a religious colour to the conflict and have been responsible for vandalising temples or churches; and those involved in drug trafficking.

- There should be a well-organised attempt to disarm people of the unlicensed and prohibited bore weapons they may have acquired from any source. A time limit should be given and those found holding such weapons after the expiry of that time limit should be booked under the National Security Act.

- Peace committees should be formed in every district comprising representatives of every section/group/tribe. There should be a peace committee at the state level also comprising senior leaders of different sections/groups/tribes.

Much precious time has been lost by the Centre. However, as Chanakya said: "We should not fret over the past, nor should we be anxious about the future. Men of discernment deal only with the present moment." The Government of India could still recover the lost ground and bring back peace and normalcy in the state. It is going to be a long haul, but it is achievable.

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Justifying The Unjustifiable

By Lt Gen Vijay Oberoi

The Author is a former Vice Chief of Army Staff and the Former Founder Director of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), and now its Director General Emeritus.

The India-Pakistan War 1971 was rapidly moving to its culminating phase by the middle of December 1971. The wires were buzzing incessantly between South Block in New Delhi, Fort William in Calcutta and the Pakistani Command Centre at Dacca in East Pakistan.

I was a witness to these historic events, as a young Major covering the War from the Military Operations Directorate and manning the East Pakistan desk, although the major policy issues were being debated by the Generals – by the COAS and DGMO in New Delhi by the Eastern Army Commander and his Chief of Staff at Calcutta and similar Pakistani Commanders at Dacca.

Besides being on the periphery of these momentous events, my battalion (1 MARATHA LI), operating rapidly on the Northern Axis of Tura-Jamalpur- Tangail-Mirpur Bridge was winning laurels while knocking on the gates of Dacca, while other columns were doing so on their respective Axes. The mood was euphoric but tense. India's Armed Forces were about to create a much-awaited massive victory. As 16 Dec 1971 dawned, the Indian Armed Forces were ready to accept the surrender of the Pakistani forces.

At around 4:30 PM, General Jagjit Singh Aurora, GOC-in-C Eastern Command, arrived at the Dhaka airport. Gens Jacob and Niazi went there to receive him. They drove to the venue of the Surrender Ceremony at the Dacca Race Course. Once the signing was over, the two commanders rose from their chairs. Then, according to the tradition of surrender, General Niazi with a trembling hand and a melancholic face handed over his revolver to General Aurora.

The historic event was recorded for posterity and that photograph became the symbol of this grand and historic event. Since then, this photograph has been displayed at every conceivable place and copies have been published in thousands of documents, including books about the wars and campaigns. However, its most important place has been the Army Chiefs office complex, where our successive Chiefs have used it as a background for meeting foreign and local guests.

In the annals of India's long history of thousands of years, certain wars and battles stand out and are embedded in the psyche of most Indians. Some of them have at various times created controversies, big and small, as some person or a group of persons have not given great thought to what was being contemplated or thought it a trivial matter, not worth wasting time on it. Reasons could be many, from not seeing beyond their noses; deeply immersed in their own self-created aura of personal aggrandizement; or having no sense of history!

The discerning persons of today, especially those who have worn or are currently wearing the uniform of soldiers, sailors and airmen, are involved in a raging controversy about an act of omission or commission that has occurred in the hallowed office complex of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), which despite being in a high security zone, is always under the scrutiny of the media and the common man.

For the last few days, it has been catapulted in the public gaze over the removal or shifting or replacement of the iconic photograph/painting of just over half a century back, as displayed above, because of the very nature of the painting, as it reflects the bravery, valor, patriotic fervor and emotional attachment of a huge variety of the Indian polity, especially the veterans, serving soldiers, sailors and airmen, and their families.

The removal of the iconic photograph taken at the Race Course Dacca on 16 Dec 1971, as the culmination of the 1971 India-Pakistan War, which our country's armed forces fought in a lightning campaign, at a loss of 3843 lives of servicemen killed and 9851 wounded,

has been till today the greatest feat of Arms of India's military. It needs to be highlighted that this was the first war on widely dispersed fronts, which India had fought and prevailed on the battlefield, creating a new country- Bangladesh, in the process.

In many ways, this date of 16 Dec 1971 had propelled the Indian Armed Forces to the ranks of global few militaries, who noted that the Indian Military had arrived!

Thus was Vijay Diwas born and celebrated, despite many bureaucratic and political hurdles, which these two entities have always created. In the early days, the much liked and respected Sam Manekshaw, who had steered not only his beloved Indian Army but also the other services too, was denigrated on specious grounds and even denied a Field Marshal's pension. In later years, when the parties in power changed, the highly apolitical armed forces were sought to be embroiled in "Congress versus BJP Wars", although denied by both!!

In what may be better called a blunder, the painting that was lovingly placed at the den of the seniormost Tiger of the Indian Army was removed and replaced, without any fanfare or notice. The removal was an act of misguided (stated in lieu of a harsher expletive) judgement, as it was no ordinary painting/photograph, but the recording of the extraordinary event in the annals of the glorious history of the armed forces of not just the modern forces of India, but one that was ranked amongst the very few that qualified to be in the vanguard of wars and battles fought by India in its various 'avatars' down the ages, irrespective of which Kingdom or which Ruler had taken on its enemy of his/her time.

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India is Proud of:

Dr Meghana Pemmaiah

Vet Who Jumps into Wells & Climbs Buildings to Rescue Leopards, Jackals & More



Dr Meghana Pemmaiah, a veterinarian from Mangaluru, cares for a wide range of animals. She helps not only beloved pets but also injured wildlife like jackals, birds, and snakes. Her dedication to treating their ailments is unwavering.

However, in her daily routine, the 32-year-old sometimes experiences unique days when the Karnataka Forest Department contacts her for rescue missions. She helps ensure that the wild cats of Karnataka are safely returned to their natural habitat in healthy condition.

“It is not about just work for me but also the love and passion I have for these animals. Humans have encroached on their lives, not the other way around. While the job comes with a set of risks, my main agenda is always to get the animal out,” she says.

Talking about why she decided to get into rescuing, she says, “It was during my masters that I got to know that wildlife veterinarian was a thing. I would watch people on NatGeo on rescue missions and it would always thrill me. I was always looking for the right opportunity which I got recently.”

After completing her degree, she joined a rescue company in Bengaluru and started working as a veterinarian. “In 2022, I moved to Mangaluru with my husband who had a clinic there. He was helping out the state’s forest department, which gave me the perfect opportunity to get into onfield rescuing,” she says.

On duty call for 24 hours, it is the passion for wildlife that keeps the veterinarian going. She has been in rescue missions which entail risks for both her and the animal.

“When I go on a mission, the animal is always my top priority. Leopards are frequently the ones we rescue, and it’s important to remember that they are just as afraid of us as we are of them. There are significant risks of injury for both myself and the animal involved,” she says.

Meghana adds that when she is on a rescue mission, she does not even think for a second before risking her life to save the animal.

In a dangerous yet thrilling incident recently, Meghana had to jump into a 20-foot-deep well at Niddodi in Dakshina Kannada to rescue a leopardess stuck in it for days.

“The well was quite deep and we could not reach the leopardess. The only option was to jump inside to sedate her and carry her up. To do this, I was put in a cage and lowered into the well. I darted at the leopardess at close range and waited until she was sedated. I dragged her into my cage afterwards and the team pulled us both up,” she recalls.

Talking about the animal and human conflict, she says, “Due to rapid urbanisation and expansion of cities and villages, we have encroached on the lands that were supposed to be theirs. We are the real threat and people need to understand that. We find so many of these animals and snakes stuck in snares and wells. Since we have taken away their home, they have nowhere to go.”

Narrating an incident where she witnessed this conflict, she says, “A leopard was stuck on the first floor of a residential building. There was a huge crowd that had gathered around. People were stuck in the building too and the situation was life-threatening. The poor animal obviously did not know what it had gotten into. I climbed to the first floor and shot at the animal with a sedative. The leopard was rescued and the mission was successful.”

“I have been in this field for more than two years now, but even today, I see that most people don’t recognise me for my work. If I’m part of a team that includes men, there’s a common assumption that they will be the ones handling all the tasks,” she shares.

Well! Meghana believes that the recognition is of little importance when it comes to rescuing. “What matters most to me is the end result. At the end of the day, my utmost concern is that the animals are safe, unharmed, and able to live in their natural habitat, free from any human-made dangers,” she remarks.

A great service to the animal kingdom by Meghana deserves all the praise.

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