

JUG SURAIYA ON LAUGHTER

FALI NARIMAN MAKES A POINT

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# Civil Society

SOUTH AFRICA  
AFTER 10  
YEARS

## HOW CSE SURVIVED THE BIG COLA TEST

*Exclusive*

*JPC and the  
new politics*



CSE Director Sunita Narain

VIEWS PEOPLE CAMPAIGNS NGOs SLOGANS CONTROVERSIES IDEAS VOLUNTEERS TRAINING BOOKS FILMS INTERVIEWS RESEARCH

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**COVER STORY**



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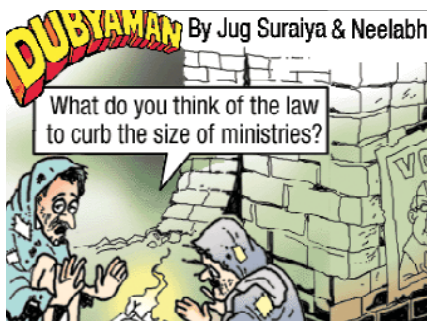


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# Civil Society

## The strong spirit of South Africa

**I**n Delhi, if you want to get to know ambassadors and the like, make sure you get on the right cocktail trail. But I caught up with Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, South Africa's high commissioner to India, at a social forestry project in Orissa's poverty stricken Koraput district. Maite was there to check out a model sponsored by BILT, the Thapar company, in the hope that something similar can be set up in South Africa. You have to give Maite full marks for enthusiasm and her willingness to trample through the unknown, kissing babies, applauding tribal women and planting a sapling. Envoys of young countries are evidently made of different stuff. Maite was an activist in the African National Congress and, ten years after apartheid was given a burial, she continues to exude all the energy and exuberance of one who has fought the difficult fight for freedom. A week later, at her office, over South African tea, she gave us a fascinating interview of two hours. We offer our readers excerpts of the interview in the hope that it will foster a greater understanding of a country with which we have historical ties, but whose modern aspirations we are yet to connect with.

Our cover story on the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and how it took on two of the world's biggest brands, Coke and Pepsi, has for long been in the making. We have been tracking the cola dispute in every issue of Civil Society. It comes as no surprise to me that CSE's tests were accurate. But such is the harshness of the real world that CSE could well have been right and yet proved wrong. It almost did come to that. I say with some pride that I have known this organisation since the time I was a rookie reporter in the eighties. Its late founder, Anil Agarwal, was a remarkable man and a source of inspiration from the time of my first encounter with him in a district of West Bengal. Anil is dead and gone, but he has imbued CSE with enough energy, courage and sense of purpose to rush in where angels fear to tread. It is not easy taking on companies the size of Coca-Cola and Pepsi. It is even more difficult carrying the message of modern science to lazy Indian politicians. Vindication of CSE's tests on Coke and Pepsi has come through hard work. It has learnt its first major lessons in advocacy. Sunita Narain is now not just heir to Anil's mantle, but the gutsy spirit of what the reborn CSE can achieve.

With this issue we begin a page devoted to schools. The page, we hope, will become two pages when resources permit. We invite students and teachers to send in contributions. PeaceWorks will be a regular column in which peace efforts of all kinds will feature. PeaceWorks is the brainchild of the Seagull Foundation, which partners Civil Society in Kolkata.

Our Perspectives section's focus on electoral reforms continues. Sanjay Kaul has made an important point about slowing down the election process so that there is greater transparency. The Voters' Forum has asked for the right to reject all candidates. Negative voting, the forum's president, KC Nahata, says is the only guarantee against unworthy candidates getting elected. An important effort is being made by the residents of Gurgaon to be included in the lists of voters. Most of Gurgaon's new residents are not on those lists. This is an interesting battle and we will be tracking it in some detail.

*Umesh Anand*

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## CAUSE &amp; EFFECT

# Ration shop dealers hauled up

Reetika Khara  
Kelwara

THE licences of three ration dealers at Kelwara, in Rajasthan's Rajsamand district, were suspended after a jan sunwai (public hearing) carried out by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), showed discrepancies in the records submitted by the dealers to the government.

An international task force on transparency, set up by economist Joseph Stiglitz with his Nobel Prize money, was present to witness the public hearing. The task force was interested in seeing how the MKSS used Right to Information as a weapon of the poor. The Jarga Vikas Samiti, the National Campaign for the People's Right to Information (NCPRI), and the Centre for Equity Studies (CES) had pitched in.

MKSS had carried out a similar exercise in December 2002. It discovered corruption in the PDS was rampant. Government records showed subsidised wheat was being sold to the poor. But investigations revealed it was being siphoned off. MKSS wanted to inform people about the Supreme Court's order and to monitor implementation.

The recent public hearing was aimed at finding out whether anything had changed. Things were much the same. MKSS found it tough to get the records. The ration dealers tried delaying tactics and used political clout. MKSS got photocopies of the ration dealers' registers just one day before the hearing. Even these were incomplete.

The ration dealers then ganged together. They accosted MKSS activists in Kelwara market and tried to intimidate them. Later, they went to houses in the village and warned people not to speak up during the public hearing. They took away ration cards from some BPL and Antyodaya people to prevent MKSS from examining them.

The dealers arrived at the hearing in full strength. So did ordinary villagers. When the hearing started the dealers began moving towards the stage. As soon as the first villager began to speak, the ration dealers captured the stage and disrupted the meeting. The pradhan joined them. It took the police and the administration 20 minutes to restore calm.

During the hearing, it was discovered that 29 ration cards did not have entries for some months. But the records submitted by ration dealers to the government showed regular sales to the cardholders. There was a difference of over 20 quintals of wheat. Faced with documentary evidence of fraud the belligerent dealers beat a hasty retreat. Officials from the district administration promised to take action against the erring dealers and issue new ration cards. In its order the Supreme Court had said ration shops should be open for 26 days in a month. But most dealers had distributed wheat only six times last year and shops were opened for just two to six days.

# Rainwater harvest on the school roof

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

BUNKER Roy, director of the Barefoot College at Tilonia, in Rajasthan, has been carrying his message of rooftop rainwater harvesting across the globe. Having shown how to do it at 200 remote rural schools in India, Roy launched a Global Rainwater Harvesting Collective (GRHC) and registered it in the Netherlands two years ago. On February 7, he signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative (WSSC), whose WASH programme emphasises low-cost sanitation through community efforts. For WASH to succeed, water is needed and Roy's rooftop rainwater harvesting is seen as a solution.

Roy has also succeeded in winning over the Ministry of Water Resources. It will provide financial support for rooftop rainwater harvesting structures at 100 government schools in 13 states. The money will be given to grassroots NGOs and communities. Each school will get two hand-flushed toilets. There will always be one toilet for girls.

The ministry's support was won after it listened to 86 NGOs from 18 states. "This was a major breakthrough," says Roy. In an interview to *Civil Society*, he talked about his plans to catch water and said it would bring interesting spin-offs locally and globally.

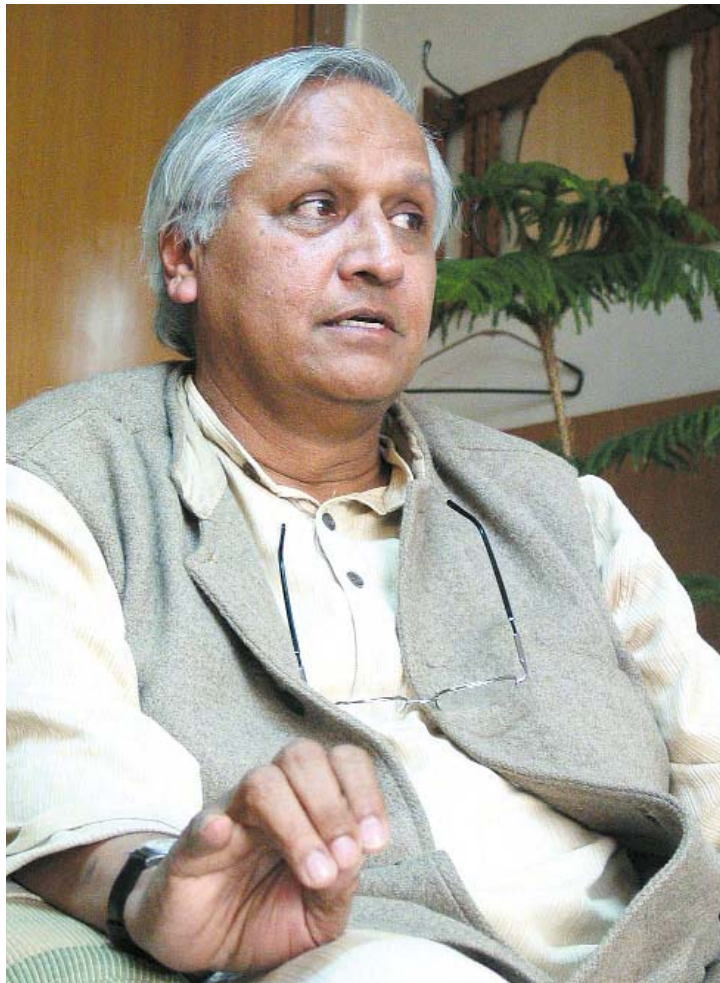
## You are taking the concept of rooftop rainwater harvesting global. Why?

Since the past several years, we have been doing rooftop rainwater harvesting in schools in India. Last year, because of a good monsoon, we collected about 27 million litres. People in villages can make these structures without depending on engineers.

This has a global message. Today there is so much donor fatigue in the development sector. They are saying money is flowing in but nothing is coming back.

So in Johannesburg, during the

World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), I got the global water mafia on my side. There are ten or twelve such people. I managed to get a written mandate to start a Global Rainwater Harvesting Collective. Anywhere in the world wherever there is a school and a shortage of drinking water we can collect rainwater. It's inexpensive and has a gestation period of only four months. Simple. This has appealed to lots of organisations all over the world. We



Bunker Roy

registered the collective in the Netherlands. And now we are looking for grassroots organisations that will propagate this idea locally. We are also trying to bring rooftop rainwater harvesting into mainstream agenda.

## Who are your supporters?

We have Robert Davey from the Prince of Wales Trust and a member from the World Economic Forum. There are business and commercial interests looking for corporate social responsibility. We also have members from the International Secretariat and the Global Gender Water Alliance from the Netherlands.

A very conservative Swiss Foundation --- their business is making pipes --- gave us money to do rooftop rainwater harvesting in 50 schools in

Sikkim. When the foundation's representative saw its impact, he gave us money for another 80 schools. Now this man is a total convert. When I said I want to do this in Mexico, China and Columbia, he was willing to back us. I'm also off to Senegal, Ethiopia, Bhutan and Nepal to identify partners.

## What impact has rainwater harvesting had so far?

We found that in brackish water areas, mothers are sending their girls to school. I went to a school in Ethiopia, some months ago. About 500 students walk 20 kms. Kids, eleven years old. They carry water in a bottle. There is no other water. We were told a rainwater harvesting structure would change the psyche of the children and the community. It will have a similar effect world-wide. We are especially targeting schools where there are more girls.

## Can rooftop rainwater harvesting technology be replicated globally?

Every region has their own version of what is best for them. And this is what engineers don't understand. We will tap only those traditional technologies available in every country. You can cut down 30% of the cost by using traditional technology.

## Rajasthan suffered drought for three years. Do you think rainwater harvesting alone can meet the needs of people?

The rainwater harvesting tank is an investment. A tank of 100,000 litres provides water for three to four months. Once it dries up, you can get government tankers to fill it up with say 30,000 litres. This can provide water for basic needs for another four or five months. What is the cost? Minimal.

In contrast, you spend Rs 30,000 for a hand pump. The water table is going down. You don't know whether the water you get will be sweet or perennial. Myths have been generated that rainwater is stagnant, it's contaminated, it has got algae.

But water is being aerated because it is constantly being used. There has never been any case of a water borne disease. This is, in fact, pure water.

...AND IN TEN YEARS IN SOUTH AFRICA 37% OF PARLIAMENTARIANS ARE WOMEN

# 'WE SAID NO WOMEN'S MINISTER'

**W**HAT has a decade of freedom meant to South Africa? Many vital things, but perhaps the most important of all is the role it has given to women in the mainstream of governance. A large number of parliamentarians are women today. There are 10 women ministers in a national cabinet of 27. Women have also been appointed to 18 ambassadorial posts in important countries. "They are everywhere," says Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, South Africa's High Commissioner to India.

How has this been possible? First of all it is the result of women in the African National Congress (ANC) not settling for token roles. They refused to be convenient wallflowers. They were also helped by enlightened leaders like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki and others. In the tenth year of its liberation from apartheid, Nkoana-Mashabane, who served as a leader in the women's wing of the ANC, spoke to Civil Society about South Africa's aspirations and concerns.

**You played an active role in the struggle for freedom in South Africa. What are the experiences that have stayed with you?**

Looking back, what really fascinates me is the economics of survival. You have the grameen bank we had what you call societies. A group of five or twelve women would get together every month and save some money. It came from knowing that with 10 rand I may not be able to buy a bag of maize, but if we collect money and give it to one person she can buy food and the next month someone else can. It makes economic sense.

In South Africa we bury loved ones with dignity. But when death would strike we had nothing. So we put together money in a kitty to help a bereaved family and there you had a society. So need based organisations came up. I belonged to some of them. We had to be really innovative to survive.

You couldn't call meetings at that time. So to get a political message across, you'd organise a fake meeting, say a football match, and then someone would quickly give a political speech, even as the match went on. Nobody knew and the police would not be listening.

**South Africa has a women's charter. How did this happen?**

The temptation was to focus on the big issues and make the rights of women something that would follow, after independence, after the end of apartheid. But we learnt from what had happened to women in other countries and decided to claim our space and insist on mainstream roles right from the beginning.

So, you see, it is not just a question of creating a department of women's affairs and stuffing anything to do with women in there because the end result is that issues that affect women are then no longer the issues of society. We said: "No women's minister." We came up with a women's charter. We brought in their views, right from small burial societies and others like them.

I remember there was an Operation Big Ears. Its mandate was to go to rural areas and ask women what they would like to see in the charter, because not everybody could read or write but they all know what is good for them. It took us almost a year to gather this information.

We then informed every government department and minister about the problems affecting women-social, political, economic. The operation was spearheaded by the National Coalition of Women for South Africa. With all these experiences we now have a charter for women. We thought before this coalition becomes an organisation, or a political party, women must go back to their organisations and be watchdogs to see that the government is implementing the charter.

**What has the women's charter achieved politically?**

We have 10 women ministers in a cabinet of 27. We have 18 women ambassadors, not in small countries, but in India, the UK, France and Washington. Our speaker in Parliament is a woman. Not less than 37% of parliamentarians are women. In municipalities 60% are women, in fact in each and every sphere of government, women



Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, South Africa's High Commissioner to India

are represented. Now they are on boards of companies, including private ones.

In every struggle, including in India, women will always be there, but they are quickly reminded where they should belong. My culture is not very different from yours. We have been extremely lucky. The women leaders we had in our freedom struggle, particularly from the leading political party, from the 1940s, refused to be subjugated. Right from the start they ensured women were represented. Our leaders had foresight.

**What are some of the gains of increased political representation?**

In South Africa, social welfare has a patients' fund for women who are over 60 years of age and are not professionals. Women get equal pay for equal work and equal access to pension. Ten years ago, South Africa was a war-torn country. We have children who were maimed and raped. For children and unwed mothers, there are special funds and opportunities.

Our focus is on preventive primary health care. Pregnant women get free health check-ups in all public hospitals, along with medications. Children till seven years of age also get free medical attention. I would say our health facilities are good and better than what is available in other third world countries.

**Do women in rural areas, working on their fields, feel the change?**

The minister of agriculture is also a woman and an activist herself. She had led a campaign to go again to the remotest areas to find out whether women feel the change.

She takes full responsibility, even while dealing with land redistribution. When we talk land and agriculture, it is not confined to the men. We make sure that on matters of ownership of land and inheritance, women are given complete equality. Ours is also a patriarchal society so you have to intervene. Our minister of agriculture, is not only opening up ownership of agricultural land to women, she is also taking it on to herself to establish projects for women which will get them a market for their produce. It's one thing to plant big and beautiful tomatoes but where will they go?

We are making sure energy is not only affordable but available for the women, so that they do not walk miles for firewood. Villagers get 50 kilowatts of electricity free, it is there in the meter, so as to rule out cheating.

**What about more modern bonds of trade and industry between India and South Africa?**

There is only so much that governments can do. Now people have to take over. I consider it important that we are setting up a CEOs forum. This will improve the scope of opportunity. Ashok Leyland, the Tatas, the software companies --- they are all in South Africa already. There are South African business houses operating in India. Much more needs to happen and I am sure it will. The trade grouping of India, Brazil and South Africa is similarly an important one. Countries like ours have to come together to push our agenda through the WTO.

# Power lines blunder into forests

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

WITH the timber mafia at his heels, JP Dabral is running from pillar to post to save thousands of Himalayan trees. An activist with the Jan Jagriti Sansthan, an NGO in Khari, Tehri Garhwal, Dabral says the government is deliberately laying transmission lines through dense forests. Those lines could have easily skirted forests and gone over bald hills. Instead, they intrude into the Rajaji National Park and the Advani forest range.

"I am not against the transmission lines because it is important for people to get electricity. I only want them built in an environment friendly manner and with appropriate technology," says Dabral. Cutting all those trees will benefit corrupt bureaucrats, politicians and the timber mafia.

In 2001, an agitation was launched against felling. The activists belonged to the original Chipko movement of the 1980s. But the administration and local politicians weren't bothered. "They labelled us anti-development and law breakers", says Dabral. "I was left with no option but to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court."

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court ordered 14739 trees cut in Rajaji National Park, so that the transmission lines could proceed. The government sanctioned another 90,000 trees. According to Dabral, only 6317 trees should be felled as per the Forest Conservation

Act (FCA).

For a while, his PIL rested with the Amicus Curiae. It was subsequently referred to the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) which bounced it back to the court. Dabral says the CEC did not bother to see the videotapes, which he had presented as evidence. They visited the project site, but didn't look where the trees were being axed. Finally, Attorney-General, Soli Sorabjee has been requested to sit with all parties-the Power Grid Corporation of India, the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Uttaranchal government-- and sort it out.

Dabral raises some valid points. He says guidelines in the FCA state only a three-meter strip of forest can be cleared below each conductor. In reality a much larger area is being shorn. The Central Bureau of Irrigation and Power Manual states that the project affected area should be surveyed by satellite imagery or aerial photography. But this hasn't happened.

Since hilly areas have slopes, damage to the surface area should have been calculated. Instead, a company called Zenith Projections has calculated only the plan area, which is naturally much smaller. So compensation to the state government is also less than what it should be.

A five-metre pit has to be dug to rig up each transmission line tower. Stones are uncovered ruining carefully terraced fields belonging to marginal farmers. On an average, says Dabral, it takes a farmer 25 years to make a field stable. But the government is paying

compensation for only three crops. "Had they ruined the forest department's land, the government would have to pay for leasing the land for 30 years," says Dabral.

Besides, people were hardly aware of what was going on. The government's notification, issued in its gazette, stated only one 800 KV line would be built. It did not tell people about the transmission line's route or its likely impact on surrounding areas.

Neither was the notification sent to the gram sabhas, so villagers were not alerted. In fact, no impact assessment has been done, says Dabral. The technology being used is unsuited to hill regions. If the towers were 70 metres in height, trees could have been saved.

"Two single circuit transmission lines should have been laid for the Rajaji National Park and the Advani forest. Using helicopters can also save trees," he says. Besides health hazards have been overlooked. "People face the threat of cancer because of electro-magnetic fields," says Dabral.

"If a villager cuts a tree, he either goes to jail or is fined. The CEC has said, in the case of the Tehri transmission line, that 3000 trees have been illegally cut. But no criminal case has been registered against the violators".

Instead sundry goons and officials are threatening Dabral.

Sympathetic readers can contact Mr Dabral at  
jp\_dabral@indiatimes.com

# RWAs struggle to add 8000 names to Gurgaon voter list

Civil Society News  
Gurgaon

FROM February 11 to 15, mobile vans and auto-rickshaws with a loudspeaker made the rounds of Gurgaon, exhorting citizens to register as voters. The middle-class, which goes into hiding once elections are mentioned, came out in droves. In just two days, 8000 new voters emerged.

People's Action, in league with Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) in 60 colonies, launched a concerted drive to register people who have shifted here. Till the early 1990s Gurgaon was Delhi's sleepy suburb. Then builders moved in, making stylish homes for the rich and promising the moon. Lured by false promises, citizens from the capital migrated.

Nobody knows their exact number though all agree it's probably a large figure and could outnumber the older inhabitants. According to Inder Nath, Convenor of People's Action, since the past ten years, the number of registered voters has stagnated at two lakhs. He says at least three lakh new settlers do not have voting rights.

The problem is, the process of registration is arduous. There are long queues and an affidavit is needed. Only the government's photographer can take the picture for the Voter Identity card. Those who dare often find their identity cards have spelt their names wrong or even mistaken their gender. Getting that corrected means starting from scratch.

People's Action had met the Election Commissioner TS Krishna Murty on January 28 and informed him about the difficulties new settlers were facing in getting registered. The EC simplified the procedure. Instead of an affidavit, the President or the General Secretary of the RWA could authenticate applications for registration.

People's Action also offered to print Form-6 for registration and Form-8 for correction in large numbers and distribute them to the RWAs. The Election Commissioner agreed. The Election Office in Gurgaon was informed. After some dilly-dallying, the



Inder Nath, Convenor of People's Action

responsibility of distributing forms and getting them authenticated was passed on to People's Action and the RWAs, around February 10.

The major glitch here was timing. By February 16, all forms had to be deposited with the local Election Office. If Gurgaon has three lakh new settlers, how can they all get registered in a few days?

Still, the RWAs and People's Action swung into action. Nearly 1.2 lakh copies of Form-6 were distributed. Palam Vihar and Sushant Lok submitted the most applications, followed by Qutub Enclave. Sitting behind a desk, with a mountain of forms before him, a visibly tired Lajpat Gupta, General Secretary of the Palam Vihar Resident's Association, said out of 1800 homes in the colony, over a 1000 people had submitted applications.

The applications continue to pour in, says Inder Nath and he is seeking another appointment with the EC to extend the last date for registration. He suggests, instead of revising electoral rolls, the EC should simply add a supplementary roll and issue identity cards later.

"The submittals show a growing trend of newer colonies responding in larger numbers than older ones," says Inder Nath.

## PEACEWORKS

# Write a poem for peace

**D**O you write poetry? Send PeaceWorks a poem for peace. Inventive offerings by poets between 12 and 18 years stand a chance of being selected for an anthology to be published by Seagull Books, Calcutta and will be posted as original writing in the PeaceWorks newsletter and website. You can send more than one poem.

The last date for submission of poems is April 30. Entries should be e-mailed to [peaceworks@seagullindia.com](mailto:peaceworks@seagullindia.com). Remember to give your full name, date of birth, school address, residential address, email address, and contact telephone numbers.

PeaceWorks is a programme of the Seagull Foundation for the Arts. We partner teachers and NGOs to bring value education into the lives of all children.

We work with government schools, slum schools, schools for the handicapped, other urban schools and NGOs working with street children and child labour. We bring together school children and parents from different communities to learn, share, and exchange.

The Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre (SAMRC) houses a library of books, films, audio and video recordings, photographs and interviews with theatre, film and art personalities across the performing and visual arts.

PeaceWorks is for and by young people. We have a network of senior school students who are Volunteers for Peace. We've organised workshops, film and photography events, teacher training programmes, a series of fundraising performances, participation in school and college festivals, debates, poems for peace projects, a media workshop, film and theatre events. For instance, last year, actor Jayant Kripalani conducted theatre workshops for interested youngsters. The outcome was 'Peacewards' an ensemble production using five monologues by Manjula Padmanabhan. Rock band Insomnia also featured. One of our fund raising events was a Blue Moon Jazz 'n' Blues Concert, with Congo Square. We screened numerous films with a message—"Boy in the Branch," by Lalit Vachani, "War and Peace," by Anand Patwardhan, Gauhar Raza's "In Dark Times" a film on the rise of Nazism. Teachers of non-formal education attended our workshops and their students participated in our cultural programmes. In January 2004, we sent two volunteers, along with a group of students, on a trip to Karachi, Pakistan, organised by The Telegraph in Schools (TTIS). We are bringing out a journal for youth to express themselves. Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, and Dr. Vandana Shiva have consented to the use of their work.

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# HAVE IDEAS? COME CLEAN

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**I**t was business unusual. The stall-owners arrived to sell the message of environment protection. With missionary zeal, they marketed rooftop water harvesting, recycled paper, natural colours, bird protection, and so on. Interested onlookers were subjected to a thorough briefing. The stall-owners were schoolchildren from Kurnool to Amreli. They were taking part in Development Alternatives CLEAN-India's bash at the Chinmaya Centre in New Delhi.

CLEAN stands for Community Led Environment Action Network. Its members are 25 schools in Delhi and 28 from other cities. The programme gets local NGOs, schools, the government and the people to work together for their environment. This time, 19 schools from 12 cities took part. Chief Minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit went from stall to stall and paid careful attention to what was being said. The Delhi government's anti-cracker campaign has been a huge success, thanks to school children and the government now wants them to educate citizens about water conservation and garbage. There was no dearth of ideas.

"When you wash your hands with water flowing from a tap, you consume 500 ml. But with Tippy Tap, you will use only 60 ml," said Praveen Gowda, a student of Class 9.

Tippy Tap is a jerry can with a tiny nozzle. Water flows out in a thin stream. It's been invented by schoolchildren from Mysore.

In Dhone, near Kurnool, three lime kilns were closed by the administration after children from Sri Lakshmi High School, conducted a study on their noxious fumes. "There

more later," says Karthik. Their stall flaunted the wonders of winged creatures.

Students from Amreli in Gujarat, have been campaigning for water conservation and medicinal plants. Amreli gets water just once a week, says Nilesh, a science and maths teacher from Maheeb High School.

Despite this drought, students have grown 75 plants. "After we wash our hands the water drains into the garden," he explains.

"We don't need big scientists and government, we can do it on our own," said Mrs Dikshit. She advised children to cycle or walk to school and promised not to eat ice-cream. She released Clean Pages an information guide



for citizens concerned about environment. Prizes were given to CLEAN programmes in Varanasi, Amreli, Kurnool and Sanskriti School in Delhi. The best stall award went to Gyan Mandir and Sanskriti School. Vasant Valley School got the best slogan prize. Amity International School were awarded for starting a garbage disposal programme.

are 40 to 50 lime kilns in a range of two to three kilometres in Dhone," explain Priti and Mansa. "People were suffering respiratory problems. But we are not asking for closure. We are looking for alternatives."

Carmel Convent School's stall warned people about adulterated food, especially ice-cream. "Even well known brands have dioxins and synthetic oil paints," says Nivita. The nutty flavour in ice-creams comes from butraldehyde, pineapple from ethyl acetate, banana from amyl acetate and strawberry from benzyl acetate.

Children from APJ School in Sheikh Sarai, Delhi, had designed a Bird Bio-Data Form. "A nice bird flies past and you want to remember it. You can quickly note details and find out

## APPEAL

Maheeb High School, Amreli, Gujarat, has 200 students from low income groups. The school is in dire need of educational material. Contact: Nilesh Masarami, Educational and Social Welfare Centre, 31, Om Nagar (3) Hanuman Para Road, Amreli-365601. Phone: 02792-225157.

# Economics before politics at Ramjas

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**R**AMJAS College brought students from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka together for a conference on regional economics at Delhi University.

The conference was the first of its kind. "We particularly wanted to discuss the future prospects of the South Asian region. We always had a Winter Economics Conference, but we decided to go international this time," explained Ipshita Pal, media coordinator of Ramjas' economics society, 'Disequilibrium', and a second-year economics student.

The three-day conference was divided into six technical sessions: Entrepreneurship, Industry in South Asia, Infrastructure in South Asia, Growth and Poverty, Trade in South Asia and Agriculture in South Asia. The meet aimed at building a forum where future economists and policy makers could discuss innovative ideas for regional development. The rapport between students indicated this was definitely possible, despite political differences.

"The conference is an excellent platform for us to discuss common economic problems, which need to be tackled with cooperation," said Niger Sultana of Dhaka University. Niger is hopeful that regional cooperation will benefit all, whether

in business, trade, transport or energy. "All the speakers and participants have highlighted these points," she added.

Citing the recent SAARC meet, Ali Fayyaz of the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) said once countries start discussing economic issues, cooperation follows. "The economic interests of the people can dominate issues in South Asia, as opposed to the political issues which have dominated till now," asserted Uzair Shah of Lahore University.

Cyril Almeida, Uzair Shah, Usman Ahmad, Ali Fayyaz, Bilal Salahuddin and Khaldoon, all LUMS students, said South Asian countries needed to get together if they were to survive in the new world regime. "Europe and America have strong fora for resolving their economic issues. South Asia has none. Even with diversities, the region is at war with poverty, gender inequality and population explosion," said Subani of Colombo University.

Should South Asia have a common currency like the Euro in Europe? Subani said this would be a good idea, provided the whole exercise was managed well. "The European countries had different polities, so it took them time to come together under the umbrella of a common currency. Our countries share a common history and culture. It should not take us too long if we work towards it," said Ayesha of LUMS.



CSE is a young organisation. A view of the newsroom at Down to Earth.

# THE COLA TRIAL

*The Centre for Science and Environment ran the risk of being shut down for saying its laboratory had found pesticides in Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Here is the story of how it faced an inquiry by Parliament, proved it was right and survived*

**Umesh Anand**  
New Delhi

It was February 4 and newsrooms across the country were waiting for a very different headline from Parliament as it wound up business before the next general elections. A joint committee appointed to verify whether pesticide residues had actually been found in bottles of Coca-Cola and Pepsi was scheduled to submit its report. At stake on one side were the fortunes of the Rs 6000 crore soft drinks business in India. Poised vulnerably on the other side was the reputation of the NGO which had tested the drinks at its own laboratory and dared to go public with its results.

The committee's report took everyone by surprise. It upheld the NGO's findings – there were indeed pesticides in those bottles. And it admonished Coca-Cola and Pepsi for not sticking to global standards. It went into questions of public health and the Indian diet. It raised objections with regard to claims made in the advertising campaigns

of the two cola giants.

Politicians aren't exactly well known for their ability to master complex detail. Exchanges in Parliament don't always create space for depth and substance. The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) was, therefore, set up amid wild rumours of an impending cover-up.

There was loose talk of how easily politicians could compromise themselves in an election year. There was a fictional price for every MP on the committee. There was muck heaped upon the motives of the NGO in question, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

Coca-Cola and Pepsi unleashed a public relations onslaught. Both said they would file defamation cases against CSE. "What are CSE's credentials?" was the common refrain of executives of the two companies. "We follow global standards" was another line often heard.

At the very least, CSE was accused of being reckless and making a big thing of nothing



at all. There were pesticides in everything from milk to meat and apples. What was the point of singling out soft drinks?

The more serious charge was that CSE was serving as an agent of the European Union, having got some of its funding from there. The issue of pesticides in Indian food products and slack Indian regulation would be used against India in trade negotiations with the Europeans.

But in some five months of deliberations, the JPC held 17 sittings. It heard scientists from across the country and representatives of eight ministries. It cross-examined CSE and the cola and bottled water companies. It sought advice from industry associations.

At the end of it all, CSE found to its relief that it had not only weathered the storm, but had, like never before, put in the public consciousness issues on which it had worked for two decades. Not least among them was the need for corporate accountability.

The JPC's two points of reference were to establish whether CSE's findings were correct or false and to suggest criteria for setting suitable safety standards for soft drinks, juices and other beverages where water is the main constituent.

Pursuing these objectives, the JPC, to the surprise of many, went into minute detail on food standards, use of pesticides, the cost of water, standards for municipal water, the use of caffeine in soft drinks, the acidity levels of these drinks, regulation, the role of the health ministry.

Perhaps for the first time ever, politicians raised the rights of the consumer and pulled up Coca-Cola and Pepsi for advertising their drinks as being free from pesticides when they were not. They differentiated between the consumer and the citizen, common property and commercial interest – saying that companies would have to pay adequately for water and be judicious in their use of this precious resource.

Members of the JPC showed a willingness to look at an issue from more than one perspective. So when they were told that use of pesticides in the US and Europe was several times that of India's, they went that extra distance and asked why pesticide residues in food were not so high there. The answer lay in better regulation and scientific use of pesticides. The result was the JPC report's call for improving pesticide management in India, fixing maximum residue limits and registering chemicals keeping public health in mind.

The JPC examined the mechanism of acceptable daily intake (ADI) for pesticides in food. It differentiated between colas and juices, saying that colas came with no real nutritional value and as such should be completely free from pesticides. It was important, the JPC said, to fix the ADI for pesticides in relation to the contemporary Indian diet. It also said that there should be standards for finished food products.

Coke and Pepsi and the industry associations representing them had questioned the scientific value of CSE's findings because its laboratory did not have accreditation. The JPC took up the issue of accreditation with great seriousness. It found that there is no such thing as blanket accreditation. Accreditation is given as a laboratory goes along with its tests in different areas. In fact, no laboratory in the country has accreditation for testing soft drinks.

The Central Food Laboratory in Kolkata and the Central Food Laboratory at the Central Food Technological Research Institute in Mysore are among the laboratories set up under the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act of 1954.

It was discovered during the hearings that CFL does not have accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratory (NABL). The CFTRI in Mysore has accreditation and certification on many counts, but not for testing water for pesticides.

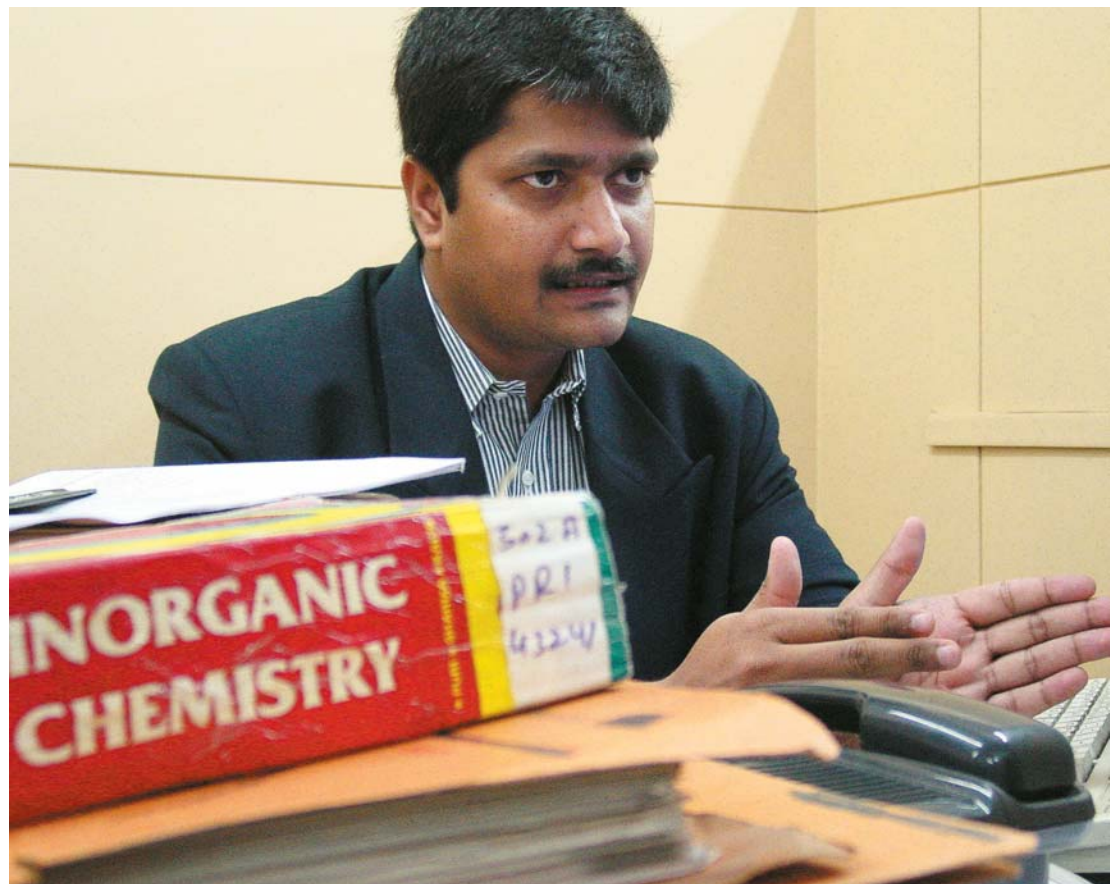
Both these laboratories have much more experience than CSE's laboratory. But the lack of experience and certification did not mean that CSE was wrong. As it transpired both these laboratories also found pesticides in the soft drinks.

But before all this was revealed in the hearings, the accreditation argument was pursued with vigour with industry representatives insisting that the CSE report be rejected on this ground alone.

If the JPC disagreed with industry on the accreditation issue, it simultaneously took serious note of what industry said on the question of EU standards. CSE had measured the pesticide residues in relation to EU norms, though, to be fair to the NGO, it had also called for Indian standards for agricultural produce and food products. It did, however, insist on EU norms for water.

The JPC sounded a note of caution, which it borrowed from industry. It observed that EU norms for pesticides are a surrogate for zero and are often used as non-tariff barriers against the developing nations. EU's standards for its own products are much more liberal than those for imports. Examples are residue limits set for sugarcane vs beet sugar and apples vs mangoes.

The JPC, therefore, proposed that India set its own standards based on scientific criteria and keeping in mind public health. In the case of carbonated beverages,



Chandra Bhushan Associate Director of CSE and the head of the Green Rating Project

**“It was necessary to keep two steps ahead of the companies. We would try to anticipate their positions and questions and be ready with information to counter it. With regard to caffeine we had the whole caffeine debate, its addictive attributed and so on with us.”**

consumed as they are by the young, it was advisable to “seek complete freedom from pesticide residues”.

If the JPC upheld CSE's findings, it also criticised it for using EU standards for pesticide residues, but not conducting appropriate verification procedures. Nevertheless, it appreciated CSE's role as a whistleblower, thereby setting the record right on the NGO's intentions in undertaking the study.

So, at the end of its tenure, a committee of MPs, in which no one had really placed

## JPC QUICKLY

The JPC broke new ground on several counts. Here in a nutshell is what it had to say on CSE, cold drinks, pesticides and municipal water.

- Corroborates CSE findings on pesticide residues in soft drinks.
- Recommends the need for stringent and health-based standards for pesticide residues in soft drinks. Asks for global best practice for caffeine in these drinks.
- Wants governments to regulate over-exploitation of groundwater and wants companies to be charged for the commercial use of water.
- Proposes unified food law with final product standards for pesticides and heavy metals.
- Suggests review of entire pesticide standards.

- Says pesticides must be re-registered very five years. Calls for doing away with a multiplicity of agencies.
- Calls for more laboratories and greater R&D.
- Demands the country must legally enforce standards for clean and potable water. Without legal standards, it is virtually impossible to hold government agencies responsible for the quality of water they provide.

The JPC was headed by Sharad Pawar. It included from the **Lok Sabha**: Ananth Kumar, Anil Basu, Avtar Singh Bhadana, Ramesh Chennithala, Ranjit Kumar PanjaE Ahamed, Akhilesh Yadav, Sudha Yadav, K Yerrannaidu. And from the **Rajya Sabha**: SS Ahluwalia, Prithviraj Chauhan, Prasanta Chatterjee, Prem Chand Gupta, Sanjay Nirupam

## ALL ABOUT CSE

THE Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) was launched in 1980. Its founder director, Anil Agarwal, was feted internationally. He was given the Padma Shri and then the Padma Bhushan. CSE's board has had an array of respected individuals, including the former President, KR Narayanan. Sunita Narain took over as director after Agarwal's death from cancer.

- 1982: CSE published the first Citizen's Report on the State of Environment.
- 1992: Down to Earth, a fortnightly environment magazine was launched.
- CSE has campaigned on clean air, pesticides, water, forest policy. It runs a rating project on industry. CSE has a laboratory for testing products in the public interest

much hope, had raised the threshold of awareness on many issues. Its report was presented by consensus. And since it was a joint committee of Parliament, it now becomes mandatory for the government to report on what it has done to implement the suggestions.

The report made headlines. But, interestingly, its fine print went largely unreported. Since the JPC's hearings were in camera, the often dramatic deliberations did not make it into the media in sufficient antiseptic detail.

Also untold was the story of an NGO succeeding against the combined public relations might of two of the world's biggest brands. How did it get its message across despite the opposition of opinion builders like the industry associations, FICCI and CII, who influence government budget provisions for their members, but could not pull this off.

### THE FIRST HEARING

Making a breakthrough with the politicians wasn't exactly easy for CSE. The first hearing teetered on the verge of disaster. The room in the annexe to Parliament House bristled with antagonisms. Two months after its report was made public, CSE was on trial. Hostile MPs, it seems, had already made up their minds about CSE and the reasons for its controversial study.

The JPC's task was to determine whether the findings were correct. But the questions that flew in that first half hour were cutting and personal. CSE was the target of trenchant suspicions. It stood accused of being an agent of the European Union, not understanding science, manipulating the media. It was in such a setting that CSE launched its defence and it did not help matters that the projector for its presentation on that fateful day was not working.

Few beginnings could have been as inauspicious and unsettling. There was also the question of procedure and decorum. Barely had CSE's director, Sunita Narain, addressed Sharad Pawar as "Pawar Sahib" than one of the members snapped: "Don't call him by his name. Refer to him as Honourable Chairman and the members as Honourable Members."

"When the JPC was set up and its terms of reference announced, everyone told us that we had had it and that we would be shut down," recalls Narain. As the first hearing got under way, that dire prospect certainly seemed a rattling reality.

A mood in the country of impatience with NGOs and their causes did not help. It was most unnerving that for all that CSE had done in the public interest, it appeared to have no public credentials. The MPs seemed to think that they already had the answers.

But since CSE was fighting for its very survival, it put a strong act in place. Its biggest weapon was its organisational skill at crafting meticulous presentations.

Narain and Chandra Bhushan, who is associate director and head of the Green Rating Project, had set aside much of their other work to focus on what CSE's strategy would be at the JPC. The whole organisation was galvanised. But a core team was set up consisting of Narain, Bhushan, Pradip Saha, Pradip Dutta, Nidhi Jamwal and Kushal Yadav. Souparno Banerjee handled public relations and the string of email press releases that had to be sent out.

The big challenge was in anticipating questions and simplifying the science that forms the basis of public health legislation. Equally important in the presentation for the JPC was CSE's account of its own record as an



Pradip Saha, Associate Director and Managing Editor of Down to Earth

**CSE found many of the MPs getting interested in the issues of water shortages, pesticides, public health and food safety. These weren't just any old NGO causes. There was a real edge to them. Most certainly, for the innovative politician, there were votes in these causes.**

NGO. The role it had played in the campaigns for clean air and water harvesting, which had brought the Congress back to power in Delhi. The awareness it had created about pesticide misuse in Kerala.

As the presentation progressed on the first day, CSE found many of the MPs getting interested in the issues of water shortages, pesticides, public health and food safety. These weren't just any old NGO causes. There was a real edge to them. Most certainly, for the innovative politician, there were votes in these causes.

The first day's hearing ended with Pawar inviting the CSE team to join the MPs for tea and biscuits. Later he told reporters that the presentation had been "impressive and pragmatic for fruit juices and Indian agriculture." CSE had clearly succeeded in placing the Coke and Pepsi issue on a much bigger canvas. More importantly, in times when elections have begun to be fought on development issues, CSE had succeeded in catching the political pulse of the JPC.

CSE went on to make two more presentations to the JPC. Interestingly, on both these occasions, CSE was not being called upon to defend its findings on Coke and Pepsi, but to explain to the JPC issues of pollution and public health. CSE was also included in the deliberations of the Bureau of Indian Standards undertaken at the behest of the JPC. The BIS meetings were important for addressing water consumption, caffeine in soft drinks and the acidity levels of these drinks, pesticides in food –

all of these issues would determine the way the JPC would look upon Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

### FIGURING OUT ADI

The members of the JPC went from being intimidating interrogators to collaborators in the search for new standards and efficient regulation. But if CSE is to be believed, it found its most reliable allies in the executives of Coca-Cola and Pepsi!

The acceptable daily intake or ADI of pesticides became the key argument put forward by CSE against the cold drink manufacturers. Incredibly, the idea came from executives of Coke and Pepsi themselves.

CSE says it tested bottled water and then soft drinks only to establish the broad point that pesticide use in the country has gone out of control. As matters progressed, there was a finer point also to be made. Soft drinks could not be treated on a par with food. There was also no reason for water to contain pesticides when processed and packaged.

CSE may not have examined soft drinks if executives of Coca-Cola and Pepsi had not tried so hard to play down the findings on bottled water. "Our decision to check out Coke and Pepsi actually followed a senior Pepsi executive's visit to our office," says Narain. "He tried so hard to tell us that there was nothing in our bottled water findings that we were sure that we needed to examine the soft drinks."

The cola companies made the mistake of trying to defend their products by saying that there were pesticides in everything. If there could be pesticides in apples, wheat, rice, milk and so on, why not in soft drinks or bottled water. The pesticide residue levels in their products were no higher and often less than in foodstuff.

As the companies continued to harp upon daily intake and pesticides in everything, CSE decided to take a close look at ADI and how it is calculated in other countries. What it found out about ADI knocked the bottom out of the arguments used by Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

CSE discovered that ADI was specifically linked to nutrition. Since the world over pesticides are used to grow crops, a permissible residue level per food item is fixed on the basis of how much pesticide is needed to grow a particular item and the requirements of a balanced diet consisting of cereals, vegetables, fruits, meats, milk products etc. The word "acceptable" in ADI quite literally means a certain amount of pesticide can be consumed because the trade-off is with nutrition. Since neither Pepsi nor Coke offer nutrition and can't be considered food, neither can be included in the ADI basket. They need to be completely free of pesticides.

The world over there is no ADI for water either. While you need pesticides to grow crops, there is no reason for having pesticide residues in water. Both drinks contain more than 80 per cent water.

It was the ADI argument that sealed the fate of Coca-Cola and Pepsi before the JPC. Incredibly, CSE would not have been so clear about ADI if it hadn't been pushed into studying it by the executives of the two companies who either misunderstood ADI or tried to twist it to their own advantage. Either way it cost them dearly.

### GOOD STRATEGY CRUCIAL

CSE's success came from its ability to think through a strategy and work according to it.

It focussed first on the political class. It showed the MPs of the JPC the interests of Coca-Cola and Pepsi

(Continued on page 14)

# 'NGOs will have to learn to reinvent themselves'

Sunita Narain took over as the director of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) from its founder, Anil Agarwal. It was a difficult mantle to inherit. Agarwal's standing as an environmentalist and original thinker is tough to emulate. CSE revolved around him. Narain was his trusted lieutenant, but few gave her much of a chance in taking the organisation towards new goals. However, two public campaigns have shown that CSE is in good health. The tests on bottled water and soft drinks have highlighted issues of national concern. The organisation has stood up to rigorous scrutiny. Extracts from an interview Narain gave *Civil Society*.

**So, you have got the better of Coke and Pepsi, two mega brands. It must make you happy.**

I'm not sure that it makes me happy because we never started off by trying to get the better of them. I would be much happier if government changed its regulation. From the very beginning, we were interested in regulation and the larger issues. If today you can ask me this question it is because Coke and Pepsi have made it out to be a war of us versus them. When we tested bottled water we did not pit ourselves against those companies. After our results were made public, the debate shifted to government and regulation. But after we tested soft drinks, both Coke and Pepsi chose to denigrate our research and single us out and naturally we had to defend ourselves. It is most unfortunate. We did not want it to be this way.

**Okay. You have been interested in the larger issues. But you chose Coke and Pepsi because they were convenient targets. It was easier to choose them as targets than to raise the issues in more complex and complicated contexts.**

The honest answer would be that we never made them a target. I am very clear about this. We started off with bottled water. We stumbled into soft drinks. When we stumbled into soft drinks we did not even know that there were just two companies that controlled the market.

**You knew they were big brands but did not know their reach...**

We thought there would be many companies. In bottled water there were many companies, in automobiles there were many companies. Here, too, we thought that there would be many companies with varying shares of the market. It was only when we began putting together our samples that we realised that there were only two companies who controlled more than 90 per cent of the market and by then we had already begun our study. The honest answer is that we did not target them.

But I will also be honest with you and tell you that it did matter that they were two big companies. After we released our study, and the way in which they reacted and took us on, it became a case of David vs Goliath. This was not our intention. But in retrospect, seeing the way government and media reacted, it did matter that they were two companies.

CSE's way of functioning, through our green rating project for industry and so on, has been to encourage good practice. We don't work with industry or against industry.

**It was repeatedly asked by executives of the two companies why you did not go to them with your findings instead of going to the media.**

That is not the way we work. We do our work and put it in the public domain. I've written about this and I'll repeat it. We began by wanting to do a municipal water study, but we did not find a thread. We found there was a big difference in where the water was sourced from, where it was filtered and when it reaches your home. We realised that unless we did a really comprehensive study over a year we might not be able to get a proper trend.



Sunita Narain, CSE Director.

It was then that we checked bottled water. When we found pesticides in bottled water we asked ourselves where it was coming from. This led us to groundwater. You must understand that we did not know they were using groundwater. Like good journalists, my colleagues got into the plants and collected samples of the groundwater. We found that they contained pesticides and the profiles matched what was in the bottles.

When we released our study we received e-mails from people who said now that we had tested bottled water, we should test soft drinks as well because they are using the same water. You will recall Ramesh Chauhan went on record saying that if we were really serious about pesticides we should look at soft drinks!

It was round this time that I was visited by a senior executive of Pepsi who gave me a long lecture on nationalism and patriotism and told me that we did not know what we were talking about. I ended that meeting wondering why Pepsi should be so worked up. We had given their bottled water a good rating. So why were they so worried? So I think curiosity and a bit of outrage resulted in us doing the soft drinks study.

We found the same thing. They were also using groundwater. The only other thing we did, because the study could not get samples from the factories, where security had been made stringent, was to compare the samples with those from the US. When we checked the

US samples it was very clear to us that there were pesticides.

**What is the role that you see civil society playing in relation to corporations and in defence of consumer and citizen interests?**

I think civil society will have to reinvent itself in the context of rapid industrialisation and economic growth. In the past 20 years we have dealt with issues of inequity, access and development. Now what you are seeing is that you will have to deal with all those issues but you will have to deal with them with a very high order of technical competence. Because the kind of pressure that this industrialisation will bring, civil society will have to provide the balance. It is an important role because industry and government have always worked very well together. Let's be very clear that despite all the talk of liberalisation that relationship will only get stronger.

**And work to the exclusion of the citizen.**

Exactly. And in the current climate, there is almost a negation of another point of view, even as deregulation is being speeded up and government is abdicating its role. Civil society will therefore have to be ready to speak up about what is going wrong. It will take a very high order of skills, knowledge and commitment to be able to intervene.

**So what you are saying is that NGOs like yourselves will have to begin looking at newer thresholds in the way in which they function.**

Well, first is the mechanism for finance. Funders have so far come to Indian civil society organisations because they want a particular study done and these organisations have worked as contract agencies. Clearly that is going to have to change. Then comes the issue of institutional structures that will allow you to go in for sustained fights. It is important, as Anil used to say, to institutionalise advocacy. Our clean air campaign began in 1996, the CNG buses came in 2002 and we are still in court. Then it is important to have highly skilled people. But the problem with such people invariably is that they are non-believers. They could be working in a Colgate factory or in CSE. So, what you need is a combination of passion and skills.

In today's environment you have to be very certain about your technical information. If we at CSE had got half a fact wrong, we would have been finished.

# Plots, theories: Is CSE an EU agent?

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**E**VEN after the detailed report submitted by the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), theories abound about why the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) tested bottles of Coke and Pepsi for pesticides and used European Union standards.

Many still believe that CSE has been the pampered paw of the European Union, which will use to its advantage in trade negotiations the dirt raked up by the JPC about pesticide misuse and the lack of regulation in India. A standard for finished food products will kill Indian industry, it is argued, because pollution is so widespread.

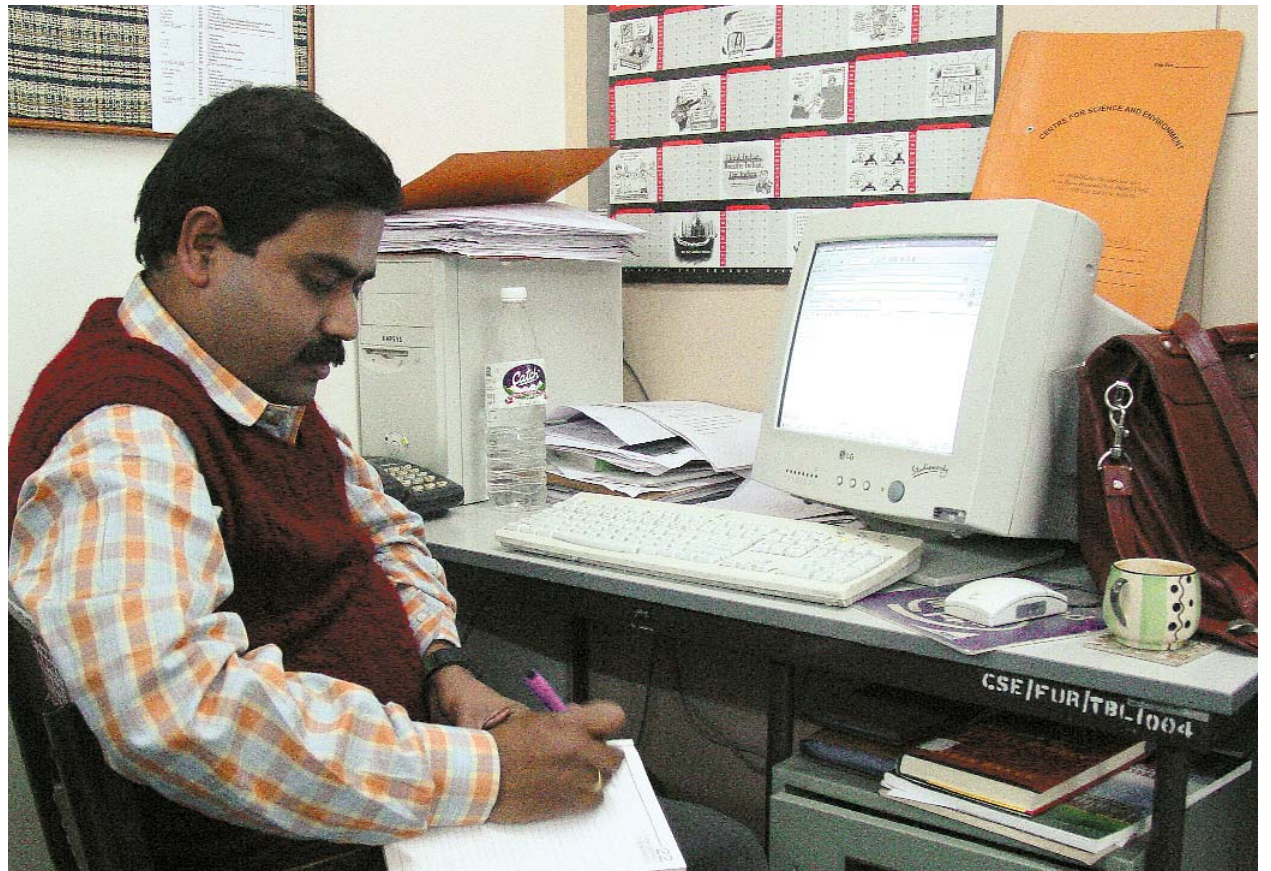
"Either CSE has been super clever or very naive," says an industry voice. "Whichever way you look at it, CSE has served the interests of the EU. And that is hardly surprising considering that it gets funding from there."

There are others who refuse to see the work done by the JPC as a significant accomplishment. "Political football was played with the issues," says another voice, once again claiming to speak for industry.

According to this version, the Congress and the Left MPs formed alliances to embarrass Sushma Swaraj and the health ministry. Earlier the government tried to get out of a sticky situation by passing the ball to the JPC, thinking, no doubt, that with the sugar baron Sharad Pawar at its head things would be worked out. Now the JPC has shown the health ministry in poor light and asked it to frame regulations.

At CSE, the grandiose designs it is credited with are viewed with much amusement. When it tested bottled drinking water in February 2003 and found pesticide residues, it was accused of being in the pay of Coca-Cola and Pepsi because it was the smaller Indian manufacturer who was hit the most by that study. Both Coca-Cola and Pepsi actually increased their market share of bottled water after that study. Now CSE finds it funny that it is being called an agent of the EU.

CSE really believes that it has done what any environmental NGO should have. It has taken up issues of water, pesticide, food chain contamination and government regulation. CSE says that if the MPs in the JPC listened and acted it is because these have become real issues. Politicians now find votes getting linked to the quality of life. Sheila Dikshit's victory in the Delhi and Digvijay Singh's defeat in Madhya Pradesh are



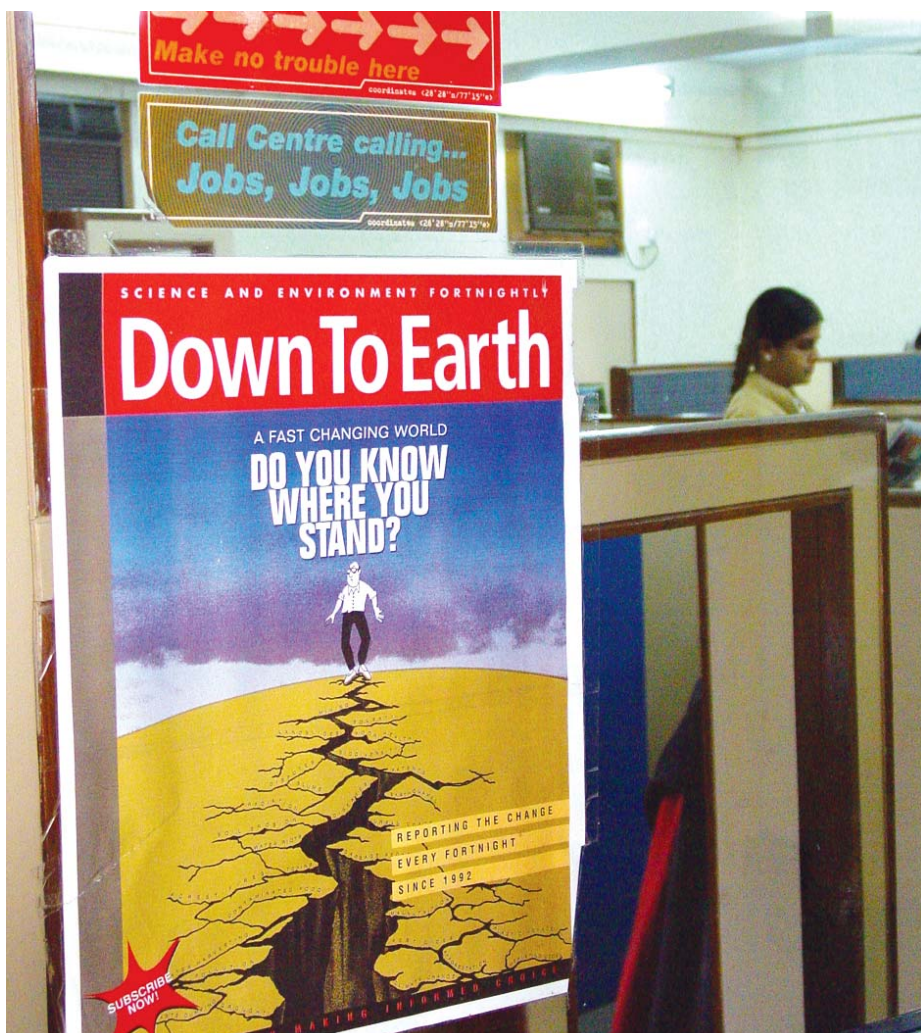
Souparno Banerjee networked the media and did a better job than high-flying PR consultants

**Many still believe that CSE has been the pampered paw of the European Union, which will use to its advantage in trade negotiations the dirt raked up by the JPC about pesticide misuse and the lack of regulation in India. A standard for finished food products will kill Indian industry, it is argued**

seen as beginnings of a trend. Politicians realise that they not only need to know more, but have to be seen as knowing, caring and delivering. It helped having Sharad Pawar as the head of the JPC. His farm moorings gave him a clear understanding of pesticide use and misuse and the problems of water shortage. Since he represents the sugar cooperatives, the cola companies could not make him buy the argument that the pesticide residues in their drinks came from sugar alone. In fact, if only to defend the business interests of his own constituency, he went into great depth to establish that the pesticides in sugar were negligible and easily identifiable. This served to point in the direction of ground water and the failure of the cola companies to purify it adequately. Or, for that matter, to pay for it. Similarly, the respected Congress MP, Prithviraj Chauhan, used his education in science to insist on detail. The government scientists and the companies were put through rigorous questioning by him. He looked at the fine print and kept pointing the JPC in meaningful directions.

He helped nuance what the committee did. So, when the draft report said that two laboratories had not found the pesticide malathion in the soft drinks, Chauhan insisted that the report state instead that three of five laboratories had found malathion. This changed the picture. The bigger reality was invariably the sum total of several realities. For instance, after CSE made its findings public the government conducted its own tests under the health ministry. These tests found pesticides in soft drinks, but not as many times above the EU and WHO levels reported by CSE. An attempt was made to discredit CSE on the basis on these findings. But the committee, once again thanks to Chauhan, set the record right by pointing out that the batch numbers of the samples were different. The essential point was that all the laboratories had found the pesticides. The third MP who made a difference was Sanjay Nirupam of the Shiv Sena. Nirupam, a former journalist, was quick to grasp the issues. Having figured out the case that CSE was making and realising the political implications of the issues, Nirupam gave great force to the environmentalist point of view.

He and Chauhan became a formidable combination.



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*(Continued from page 10)*

not synonymous with those of the people who would vote them to power. Groundwater, pesticide misuse and public health in general were issues with which CSE struck a chord with the MPs.

CSE worked hard at giving the impression that it was reasonable and scientific in its approach. Pesticides could not be wished away in weeks or months. So, India-specific standards were needed, just as Europe had standards for food to suit itself.

But simultaneously, soft drinks could not be equated with fruit juices and other foods. Setting standards for Coke and Pepsi was not the same as setting standards for the Indian farmer. CSE emphasised that it wanted water to have zero pesticide residue, but

## DIVISIONS BETWEEN COMPANIES

It was also CSE's strategy to keep an ear to the ground and exploit the divisions between companies. So it harped on cleaning groundwater of pesticides because Coca-Cola said it could do it and Pepsi said it could not. It was also useful that Indian producers of bottled water said that it was possible to clean up water for just a few paise a litre when the two MNCs insisted that it would send the costs of their products soaring.

Such divisions helped buttress CSE's advice to the JPC that it needed to know more, ask more, probe further and not rely on what the public relations agents of the companies were disseminating.

CSE similarly drove home the point on caffeine. Coca-Cola looked on as Pepsi

squirmed over the high caffeine levels in Mountain Dew. The drink had captured a huge share of the market and Coca-Cola was happy to see Pepsi badgered.

Internationally, caffeine is permitted only in cola drinks because it is needed in them to modify taste. It is not used in all soft drinks. Caffeine is allowed only in moderation because it is addictive and gives the body artificial spurts of energy.

Why then was Pepsi using caffeine in Mountain Dew? Was caffeine the secret of the brand's rapidly acquired market share? As Coca-Cola watched Pepsi being fingered, CSE used the opportunity to drive home the whole issue of caffeine in soft drinks. Both Coca-Cola and Pepsi provide caffeine-free drinks in developed countries, then why not in India? This showed up both companies as short-changing the Indian consumer. It also showed the companies as being heartless and manipulative since children are big consumers of cold drinks and caffeine is highly addictive.

## SPEED AND INFORMATION

As the hearings progressed, CSE realised its most effective skill was in providing irrefutable information at great speed. Invariably it took its leads from sloppy executives representing Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

It was Pepsi itself that revealed at the meetings of BIS in Mumbai that its drinks had a Ph of 2.3. CSE insisted that this was far too acidic. When Pepsi said that this was what it considered necessary, CSE hunted far and wide and found that South Africa had a standard of 2.5, which soft drinks manufacturers, including Pepsi, were adhering. The acidity levels were being kept high in India to kill off microbes and increase the shelf life of the soft drinks.

"It was necessary to keep two steps ahead of the companies," says Chandra Bhushan. "We would try to anticipate their positions and questions and be ready with information to counter it. With regard to caffeine we had the whole caffeine debate, its addictive attributes and so on with us." CSE's ability to find the South African standard at short notice and confront Pepsi with it, took the company by surprise.

Similarly, while the companies insisted before the JPC that they were paying for their water, CSE went and produced a detailed study of how much each unit was paying across the country. It also compared this to the cost of water elsewhere in the world. It made the companies look silly and resulted in the JPC accepting that water was a common property resource which could not be given free or for a pittance to commercial interests.



Researchers at work: CSE's most effective skill is in providing information at great speed

did not expect the same standard for vegetables or wheat or fruit juice.

But perhaps the most effective was the debate on sugar. The soft drinks companies said that the pesticides in their drinks came from sugar. The JPC report goes to great lengths to disprove this.

Apparently Sharad Pawar, who represents the sugarcane growing belt in Maharashtra, and has a good understanding of the problems of agricultural exports, took a keen interest in giving sugar a clean chit.

So where the adolescent, and allegedly reckless, CSE was expected to flounder in the face of adult questioning, it emerged as being stable, reasonable and well informed. It succeeded in convincing the politicians in the JPC that there were political dividends to be had from the positions it was taking.

## ISSUES MATTER. WE'VE DONE SEVEN

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# The genesis of an idea minus PR

**Mimmy Jain**  
New Delhi

CHANCES are that you have heard of Prema Sagar and Genesis Public Relations, the company she founded ten years ago and which now has 90 plus big clients across the country. But it is unlikely that you would have come across the Genesis Foundation. It is one of Prema's best-kept secrets.

Genesis Foundation seeks to help medically challenged "supernatural" children. Medically challenged because they have no access to the kind of medical assistance that is required for the complex physical disabilities that afflict them. Supernatural is Genesis' term for that much harsher word, "orphans". The Foundation works closely with the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre in New Delhi.

Five-year-old Kavita is one of Genesis' beneficiaries. The medical name for her condition is unpronounceable, Arthrogyrosis Multiplex Congenita. When you look at her, you realise Kavita has no joints in her arms-no elbow and no wrist. Try and hold your arm stiff for an hour and see what all you are able to do. That should give you an inkling of little Kavita's problems.

Till recently, the pride of Kavita's life was a long, wooden spoon someone had got her from Switzerland. She could eat by herself using it. But the spoon broke. Now Genesis Foundation's Rama Naidu is thinking of ways to get another one made for her, this time maybe in steel so that it will not break.

"She sings all the time," says Rama, a catch in her voice. "She can't put her hand up to move her cap out of her eyes, but she knows all the words to Jadoo from Koi... Mil Gaya. In fact, they all sing all the time. And their songs keep echoing in my mind."

As a registered body, Genesis Foundation came into being in April 2001, but the work of helping medically challenged children started in 1985 when Prema came upon Naveen in a Delhi orphanage. Five-year-old Naveen had been thrown into a dry well by his drunken father. Every bone in his little body was broken. His relatives took him to hospital, but abandoned him there.

"I took him to a hospital and the paediatrician there said, 'Don't waste your money on him. He has no future.' I was livid," says Prema. "I asked him, 'Since when did you become God?'"

Today, Naveen is well-adjusted in his adoptive family in California and zips around in his electric wheelchair. "Even the wheelchair is needed only because of a bad operation in India," says Prema.

Genesis Foundation works closely with two orphanages in New Delhi, though more orphanages are coming



Prema Sagar: Genesis Foundation came into being when Prema came upon Naveen in a Delhi orphanage.

forward now to seek help. It only offers medical assistance to the children, working with 10% of Genesis PR's net profits. The foundation takes up only three or four cases at a time, selecting the children on the basis of the severity of their problem.

"We are building one brick at a time so that each one gets 100%," says Prema. "It's a long process. From the basic exam to checking out possibilities to going to specialists, chalking out a treatment plan and then spaced out surgeries-it takes a year or two to rehabilitate each child." So far, two children have been completely rehabilitated, another five are in the process.

In November, Genesis Foundation was recognised and empanelled by the Charities Aid Foundation, UK, for its fundraising projects, in particular the Give As You Earn Project. The Charities Aid Foundation handles a billion pounds of funds globally in a year, and under its Give As You Earn Project, it provides business houses with a list of charitable organisations. The employees of the business houses can ask for amounts to be put aside from their monthly salaries to go to the charity of their choice

from the list.

Genesis is also set to launch its Share a Smile project, in which it will introduce the Share a Smile lapel pin and card stand for people to buy. It plans to approach schools in Delhi to get the children there to sell the lapel pins, which cost Rs 500 each. The money will go to the foundation corpus. "The process of creating awareness is just as important," says Prema. "Children are easily sensitised. We just need to make the effort."

Genesis PR staffers help, too, in the foundation's work, on a purely voluntary basis. They take it in rotation to visit the orphanages on a Friday afternoon and help the children there with their homework. They stay with the children while they are in hospital.

However, the medically challenged children take a heavy emotional toll of those who work with them. Prema says they decided against allotting a person per child because it was too stressful. "When you feel little arms creep around your neck, and you know this child is facing an operation tomorrow from which she may not emerge alive, it breaks your heart," says Rama.

## WHEN Mumbai WENT running

**Deepali Gupta**  
Mumbai

RIPPLES appeared on the calm waters of the ocean. No, it was not Godzilla thumping on the streets, but over fifty thousand feet drumming the Marine Drive in Mumbai, on Sunday, 15th February, as they ran the first ever International Marathon held in India.

Sponsored by Standard Chartered, the marathon was divided into three segments: the Marathon - 42 kms, the Half-Marathon - 21 kms, and the Dream Run - 7 kms. Few other than trained athletes attempted the entire 42 kms, but on the start line of the Half-Marathon was an unlikely candidate: Anil Ambani, Vice-chairman and Managing Director of Reliance Industries Ltd. The Dream Run was the most star-studded as stars from tinsel town joined the race. From Kajol to Kapil Dev, from Rahul Bose to Mandira Bedi, people from all walks of life came to express solidarity. Was it this that brought Mumbai on the streets at 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning? Perhaps, yes. Little surprise then that a total of Rs. 1.5 crores was raised for charity.

The official charity of the event was the Give India Foundation. People however, ran for a host of reasons. "I run for my country, so everyone can be a sports person,"

said Kapil Dev, before the Dream Run. Some college students ran to test their fitness. A pregnant woman participated for her yet to be born child. Former Olympian Shiny Wilson ran for Sankara Raman (a victim of muscular dystrophy), and Jogger's Park star Perizaad Zorabian ran for the National Association for the Blind (NAB). "This is a great chance for NGO's to raise funds and create awareness," said Rahul Bose.

Supported by names such as Kumar Mangalam Birla, Adi Godrej, Amitabh Bachchan, Amar Singh and corporates such as Sahara, HSBC, ANZ Grindlays, Hindustan Lever Ltd., Anil Ambani ran to raise a fund of Rs. 30 lakhs for a sports scholarship program. While one of Ambani's reasons for running was the fund raiser, Ambani called running the 28 kms (Half-Marathon and Dream Run) a "meditative experience" and a "personal achievement."

He claims to have lost 37 kgs since he started training for the marathon. There were some close contenders for the best costume award in the dream run. 64-year-old Felix D'Souza, dressed as Gandhi gathered a following while bystanders cheered him with slogans of "Vande Mataram" and "Bharat Mata ki Jai." A navy officer gloated that he came dressed as Alexander the Great "to conquer the marathon!"

Although the rewards were substantial - 210,000 US dollars - it was treated more as a social and charitable event.

# 10 WORST CORPORATIONS OF 2003

Russell Mokhiber and Robert Weissman

THE year 2003 was not a year of garden variety corporate wrongdoing. No, the sheer variety, reach and intricacy of corporate schemes, scandals and crimes were spellbinding. Not an easy year to pick the 10 worst companies, for sure.

But Multinational Monitor magazine cannot be deterred by such complications. And so, here follows, in alphabetical order, our list of the 10 worst corporations of 2003.

**Bayer:** 2003 may be remembered as the year of the headache at Bayer. In May, the company agreed to plead guilty to a criminal count and pay more than \$250 million to resolve allegations that it denied Medicaid discounts to which it was entitled. The company was beleaguered with litigation related to its anti-cholesterol drug Baycol. Bayer pulled the drug -- which has been linked to a sometimes fatal muscle disorder -- from the market, but is facing thousands of suits from patients who allege they were harmed by the drug. In June, the New York Times reported on internal company memos which appear to show that the company continued to promote the drug even as its own analysis had revealed the dangers of the product. Bayer denies the allegations.

**Boeing:** In one of the grandest schemes of corporate welfare in recent memory, Boeing engineered a deal whereby the Pentagon would lease tanker planes from Boeing. The pricetag of \$27.6 billion was billions more than the cost of simply buying the planes. The deal may unravel, though, because the company in November fired for wrongdoing both the employee that negotiated the contract for Boeing and the employee that negotiated

the contract for the government. How could Boeing fire a Pentagon employee? Simple. She was no longer a Pentagon employee. Boeing had hired her shortly after the company clinched the deal.

**Brighthouse:** A new-age advertising/consulting/strategic advice company, Brighthouse's claim to infamy is its Neurostrategies Institute, which undertakes research to see how the brain responds to advertising campaigns. In a cutting-edge effort to extend and sharpen the commercial reach in ways never

## Brighthouse's claim to infamy is its Neurostrategies Institute, which undertakes research to see how the brain responds to advertising campaigns

previously before possible, the institute is using MRIs to monitor activity in people's brains triggered by advertisements.

**Clear Channel:** The radio behemoth Clear Channel specialises in consuming or squashing locally owned radio stations, imposing a homogenised music play list on once interesting stations, and offering cultural support for U.S. imperial adventures. It has also compiled a record of "repeated law-breaking." The list includes broadcasting conversations without obtaining permission of the second party to the conversation.

**Diebold:** A North Canton, Ohio-based company that is one of the largest U.S. voting machine manufacturers, and an aggressive peddler of its electronic voting machines, Diebold has managed to demonstrate that it fails any reasonable

test of qualifications for involvement with the voting process. Its CEO has worked as a major fundraiser for President George Bush. Computer experts revealed serious flaws in its voting technology, and activists showed how careless it was with confidential information. And it threatened lawsuits against activists who published on the Internet documents from the company showing its failures.

**Halliburton:** Now the owner of the company which initially drafted plans for

privatisation of U.S. military functions -- plans drafted during the Bush I administration when current Vice President and former Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney was Secretary of Defence -- Halliburton is pulling in billions in revenues for contract work -- providing logistical support ranging from oil to food -- in Iraq. Tens of millions, at least, appear to be overcharges. Some analysts say the charges for oil provision amount to "highway robbery."

**HealthSouth:** Fifteen of its top executives have pleaded guilty in connection with a multi-billion dollar scheme to defraud investors, the public and the U.S. government about the company's financial condition.

The founder and CEO of the company that runs a network of outpatient surgery,

diagnostic imagery and rehabilitative healthcare centres, Richard Scrushy, is fighting the charges. But thanks to the slick maneuvering of attorney Bob Bennett, it appears the company itself will get off scot-free.

**Inamed:** The California-based company sought Food and Drug Administration approval for silicone breast implants, even though it was not able to present long-term safety data -- the very thing that led the FDA to restrict sales of silicone implants a decade ago. In light of what remains unknown and what is known about the implants' effects -- including painful breast hardening which can lead to deformity, and very high rupture rates -- the FDA in January 2004 denied Inamed's application for marketing approval.

**Merrill Lynch:** Fresh off of a \$100 million fine levied because analysts were recommending stocks that they trashed in private e-mails, the company saw three former execs indicted for shady dealings with Enron. The company itself managed to escape with something less than a slap on the wrist -- no prosecution in exchange for "oversight."

**Safeway:** One of the largest U.S. grocery chains, Safeway, is leading the charge to demand givebacks from striking and locked out grocery workers in Southern California. Along with Albertsons and Ralphs (Kroger's), Safeway's Vons and Pavilion stores are asking employees to start paying for a major chunk of their health insurance. Under the company's proposals, workers and their families will lose \$4,000 to \$6,000 a year in health insurance benefits.

*Russell Mokhiber is editor of the Washington, D.C.-based Corporate Crime Reporter. Robert Weissman is editor of the Washington, D.C.-based Multinational Monitor. From: alternet.org*

## French hijab, turban ban moves along

AMID much national and international hue and cry France's lower house of parliament has adopted a controversial bill that would ban Islamic headscarves and other religious symbols in schools. The text, put forward by President Jacques Chirac's ruling centre-right party and supported by the left-wing opposition Socialists, was adopted by a vote of 494 to 36. It will now be sent to the parliament's upper house, the Senate, where Chirac's UMP party has a large majority, and is expected to become law well in time for the start of the next school year in September.

The ban is sought to be explained as a secular measure. And the issue has become so politically charged that it has become a matter of more pride than prejudice for the French who feel that their perspective is somewhat misunderstood outside France as the figures clearly show. Only 29% of all the French people are opposed to the ban and 69% are for it. More strangely, 42% of the French Muslims are for it and 53% against it.

Even though the ban targets the hijab it includes all ostentatious religious symbols and therefore has the Catholics, Jews and even the 15,000 strong Sikh population opposing it. The Sikhs who normally keep a low profile came out to demonstrate on the streets in Paris in January. "During the first world war, our Sikh ancestors died for France with their turbans on," said

Chain Singh, Spokesman for France's sikh community.

**Rabindra Sangeet in Paris:** It was a moment of bliss to witness a small gathering of French poetry and music lovers enthralled by Rabindra Sangeet and its French translation, who paid 15Euros to be duly satiated with a plate of rice, dal, chicken curry and sabzi before the show began. This "soiree indienne" arranged on a weekday evening by the Cultural Center of a little township called Livry Gargan is why Paris is so special.

Personally, the evening was even more fulfilling for having met a young French woman who had just returned from the WSF meeting in Mumbai, and hear first-hand all about it. She was quite ecstatic to have shared space with her national hero, Jose Bove as well as, to have been part of an historic event. It was evident that she was having difficulty in effacing the smile that she said India had permanently planted on her pretty face. "Now I can put faces to those I work for". She works for an NGO dealing in commerce equitable or fair trade.

**Switzerland's life sentence:** Switzerland took the unprecedented step of deciding by its frequent exercises in direct democracy - the referendum - a new law that would make a life sentence for violent criminals exactly

that, a life sentence, without parole that is. For human rights advocates this seems to be a step backward, in fact it is contrary to the European Union's position on clemency. The Swiss justice minister, Christoph Blocher, however felt that it was "a reaction to years of all-too-lax sentencing practice and is the expression of a widespread mistrust of officials and penal experts". As

historians have often observed, the political pendulum swings in reverse after it crosses a natural threshold -- a further endorsement to Buddha's middle path.

**Haunted by Iraq:** As the American cabinet's victory in Iraq unravels, the right questions are finally being asked by election year aspirants. Some of the more worrisome issues beginning to surface are: What precise

intelligence did London and Washington receive that could have possibly justified the immediate undertaking of war? What legal stand do the Iraq War participants ultimately have if charged with an illegal war and occupation. Charges of spying against UN members (with all requisite proofs) are now being raised against the UK/USA axis. These are some of the questions that will keep ruling politicians awake at night.

### LETTER FROM EUROPE



Riaz Quadir in Versailles



# Civil Society

## PERSPECTIVES

**Can politics be cleaned up? Can elections be made fair? Tell us how in these pages every month.**

## Open up and slow down

SANJAY KAUL



**A**FTER the election schedule notification by the Election Commission for the assembly elections in Delhi, we undertook a sortie, trying to goad political parties into coughing up names of ticket aspirants. The idea was simple; if we knew who planned to represent us, we could involve the electorate in rooting for or against the

candidate depending on his or her past performance, or antecedents if he or she was a first timer.

Naturally, this was too much to ask for. Ticket distribution is a time-honoured tradition not without its rituals and deities. In the typical party style, it has to do more with being part of the inner circle of the one who is in the inner circle. At any rate, the point was that this pressure would perhaps open up the process to finer scrutiny and somehow involve civil society groups in working for or against candidates, before they were nominated.

Having made our point, we petitioned the EC with two suggestions that we thought would alter the situation drastically and force political parties to adopt a more transparent system that not only attacked the hegemony in the ticket distribution apparatus, but also effectively curtail criminals entering the fray - a natural corollary, we believe, of letting the people into the process.

The first recommendation was with regard to the duration of the schedule. It is our considered opinion that a schedule that allows literally just 13 days from nomination to election is asking for inbuilt corruption in the system. We said this is why the pitch of electioneering is so high; why elections ended up being more about din and clatter rather than mind and matter. It is our thinking that if the entire process were extended over a longer period, it would engage the middle class/civil society with the political class and result in a more proactive electorate and cleaner politics. Our specific suggestion to bring this about was to have three nodes in the election schedule: a Public Notice of intent, where all aspirants filed for prospective nomination and the information delivered to the electorate; 45 days later comes the final Nomination; and polling only after another 45 days. In effect, a 90-day election process.

A lot of people balk at this suggestion imagining all sorts of hidden dragons, but any extrapolation of this from a rational point will only point to the opposite. Imagine the results of such a correction: all those wanting to stand for elections must expose themselves publicly a good three months ahead of the polls. This includes competing candidates from the same parties from the same constituencies - what could be better for a true



**A schedule that allows just 13 days from nomination to election is asking for inbuilt corruption in the system**

democracy? Now, all of these must generate enough mass support in the electorate, among civil society groups and the media to actually follow through on their aspirations and be selected to represent their parties. This would also bring independents and smaller parties on a more equal footing than ever before. Then again, a longer election schedule would automatically require a more balanced expense account for the candidates - not blowing up money trying to do 30 rallies in 13 days in helicopters, but a more restrained spending that is spread over 90 days.

We have also argued that very often this 13-day litmus test becomes a corroding influence when serious calamities occur clouding the vision of an entire electorate moving its view from a rational viewpoint to an emotional response. Thus, a communal riot becomes easily exploitable if its close enough to the elections or an onion price hike can bring down an otherwise good five-year performance.

For the EC, on the other hand, the relaxed time frame would mean better allocation of resources, a less hurried pace of elections and better management overall.

In this systemic alteration, another recommendation is also incumbent and this, too, was proposed by us to the EC: We said, just do away with the withdrawal option.

Our argument being that the present three-day gap between nomination and withdrawal is being misused to negotiate, or engage in barter deals or put up dummy candidates -- all of it to derive some pecuniary or political mileage by spurious candidates or palace intrigue buffs. Three days to rethink nomination seems like a strange option for something as serious as representing an electorate; and so we argue that anybody who can change his or her mind so easily for something as serious as elections cannot be serious in the first place.

Above all, our recommendations are based on reversing the age-old tradition of Indian politics and its feudal remnants. Candidature should itself be something that is fought out - not in dark ante-rooms of party honchos in the late hours of the night, but in the open view of the electorate with a good look at what the aspirant brings to the table. Much like the US primaries, this would free popular choice from the clutches of cronies and put power in the hands of the media, civil society groups and the electors. And this, more than any law, would attack the problem of criminalisation of politics squarely.

*Sanjay Kaul is president, Peoples' Action*

# NOTA could be the easy answer

RITA ANAND

A large chunk of the urban middle-class does not vote and it isn't just laziness which keeps them indoors. Many say political candidates are corrupt, communal or inefficient so why should citizens vote? According to KC Nahata of the Forum of Voters, people are actually protesting the choice of candidates.

"Rich people don't vote because they have realised it's futile. My campaign seeks to give expression to the frustrations of the middle-class and is meant to make them feel empowered," says Nahata, a Delhi based businessman.

Nahata suggests that the electronic ballot box should give people the option of voting for nobody or "none of the above" (NOTA). Negative voting must be recorded. If the percentage of negative votes is more than the total number of votes cast for the various candidates, the election should be cancelled. Rejected candidates cannot appear again.

"We can then compel our political parties to vacate the election field and inspire

to six main political parties. Forty smaller parties got 27% of the votes. The remainder of just 6% went to the other candidates. "By not voting people are indirectly supporting the main political parties," he says, "but if such indirect support is converted into protest it can have an impact."

The Forum of Voters has been campaigning to get NOTA officially recognised. Since the past three years they have held seminars and workshops to tell people about the importance of the protest vote. Groups in Mumbai, Kolkata and Baroda have picked up the issue.

The Law Commission has recommended negative voting be "actively considered" to the government. Eminent citizens including Soli Sorabjee, Attorney-General of India, Vice President Krishan Kant, Rajni Kothari of the Centre for Developing Societies, Dr Satyanarayan Reddy, former Governor of Orissa and Uttar Pradesh support the idea.

"Politics should be an extension of social service," says Nahata. "First we give candidates authority and then we chase them to implement our work and they let us down."

Instead, candidates must be chosen by the people and not by the political parties. They should have worked for their constituencies. The people must examine their report card and decide whether they are worthy.

"Puncture the role of money and create a level playing field then you have democracy," he says. People of the constituency should finance the election campaign of their chosen candidate. Every person can contribute at least Rs 10. "The candidate will have a wide support base. He or she will not be financed by industry or vested interests and will carry forward the agenda of the people," says Nahata, with confidence.

According to Nahata, so far elections have been exam-oriented. "If people work for their constituency consistently they will not have to sweat it out last minute," he says. "Less money will be required. Voters keep tabs on candidates. The amount of money a candidate spends cannot be hidden from them."

He recommends that politicians start at the bottom and work their way up. "First, contest municipal elections, say at the age of 25, gain experience and then apply for the Vidhan Sabha. For the Lok Sabha candidates should have at least 15 years of experience. The age of retirement for a politician should be 60 years". Apart from honesty, the candidate should know economics and understand which policies would benefit his or her constituency.

"Internal democracy is important. The top down

approach does not work. Political parties must recruit good workers who have a grassroots perspective," he says.

But for such a "Voter Satyagraha" to take place, people need to be upright and understand the implications of the present system. "If the voter does not change, nothing will because politics is intensely competitive," explains Nahata. Democratic education is essential and he recommends people who are not funded by vested interests, educate the people.

"These changes are important for the health of democracy, worldwide," says Nahata.

In 1989, President Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the rejection vote in the former Soviet Union. Traditionally, the Communist Party would field one candidate and ask the people to approve. But when the rejection vote was introduced, veteran communist party apparatchiks found themselves rejected.

Fresh elections resulted in candidates with cleaner records being fielded and winning. Those who lost forfeited their positions in the party. The rejection vote, it is believed, cleansed the Communist party.

In the US, the state of Nevada has the NOTA option, since 20 years. Although there is some controversy about how much it has increased voter turnout, citizens have voted overwhelmingly to retain it. NOTA has won four times, when people were unhappy about the candidates. Ralph Nader and Al Shugar, founder of Seagate Technology, have been lobbying for NOTA's introduction in California.



KC Nahata of the Voters Forum

genuine candidates to come forward. We can also force the political parties to put up only their best candidates, known for the social service they have done for the people in their constituency," he says.

Nahata is confident that such a provision will reduce bogus voting, since more people will be encouraged to vote, albeit negatively. In every election at least 15% of votes cast are bogus. In Hajipur, Bihar, Ram Vilas Paswan's constituency, the voter turnout was larger than the total number of voters in four booths.

Maybe negative voting is time-consuming and costly, but explains Nahata, re-election is an investment. "The old system did not deliver. By the new process we can be hopeful of desired results by electing the best representatives for our Lok Sabha and State Assemblies," he says.

Blank voting used to exist but the electronic voting machines have done away with it. However, even today, if a voter enters the booth and then decides not to vote because he or she does not like any of the candidates, their refusal has to be noted by the Returning Officer. A remark is entered against their names in the entry book. Although these negative votes are added up, they have no effect on the outcome of the result.

"People are not aware of this provision. If many unhappy people reject candidates, political parties will be forced to rethink. It can also damage the authority and prestige of the candidate because a majority of people have clearly stated that they do not accept this candidate as their representative," says Nahata. "The number of rejections should be publicised by the media."

Nearly 67% of votes cast in the last general election went

**If the percentage of negative votes is more than the total number of votes cast for the various candidates, the election should be cancelled. Rejected candidates should not be allowed to stand for election again**

# 'Feel good' is fine, but feel happy, secure is better

FALI S NARIMAN

*An unreported speech in the Rajya Sabha during the passage of the recent interim budget made a powerful point.*

SIR, during this debate on the Budget, the honourable members have attacked the government, the honourable ministers have supported the government but I would appeal to all sections of this House to congratulate the government, not for this Budget, but for nominating such a fine, distinguished economist Mr (Bimal) Jalan, who just spoke. He has made a signal non-political contribution and helped to raise the level of debate.

Sir, I have been in this House for nearly four years and the single fact that has impressed me during this period is the consistent, low key and soft-soft approach of the Leader of the House, only to be matched by the soft voiced and eloquent response of the Leader of the Opposition. I have great admiration for each of them. Despite great provocation at times, I have never seen or heard them ever raising their voices or ever raise the rhetoric of the debate. And I often wonder, and I tell my honourable colleagues, why all of us cannot emulate these two leading figures in this House of Elders.

The equable temperament of the Finance Minister, I believe is reflected in his speech on the Interim Budget. There are no extravagant claims, no beating of the drum, except at least one of the concessions that are announced is apparently given with a view to impending elections. He that runs may read them. "The recommendation of the Fifth Central Pay Commission Report that DA should be merged with basic pay wherever DA exceeds 50% of pay with effect from 1 April, 2004, is clearly wooing a large number of voters, namely the government servants, without the financial implications of inflation. I wish the Finance Minister had used the same rational, restrained language, which he used in paragraph 31, when speaking about reviving upwards the standard deduction for income tax purposes. He said: "This question needs to be revisited." I wish he had said that.

But Sir, having said all this, unlike my learned colleagues, I have no figures to offer; I have no figures to refute. I have only some apprehensions to voice. I have uppermost in my mind what the Finance Minister said in the opening paragraph of his speech. He has said, "Growth statistics are very important, they are vital inputs." But for that reason he says that it is important for us to have, what he calls "gross national contentment" for an era of distributive justice. "It is," he says, "the catalyst that motivates redoubled national endeavour." I agree. I like this phrase "gross national contentment" because, as a non-party member it enables me to ventilate my apprehensions. The country will see greater and greater economic prosperity, and, if you will pardon my saying so, without reference to whichever government is there, because I always believe that the country is always greater than all the governments it has had and it will ever have. The Finance Minister envisages in his interim Budget Speech that there will be greater national contentment leading to national endeavour. But let us please examine what this means. It means greater contentment for all sections of society not for one section not for one community not for one class but for all.

I have an apprehension when I see visions of economic prosperity -like the Finance Minister --- but I also see visions of growing intolerance and religious bigotry and sometimes visions of hatred and as a member of a minority community I sometimes shudder. I also see visions of more and more unemployment. We cannot have national contentment, unless the minorities, the jobless, the unemployed, particularly the educated unemployed, are given hope and avenues of progress.

We are a pluralistic society with manifold cultures. We have a large pluralistic populace. If your party, Mr Finance Minister, envisages victory in the coming elections, then I wish you Godspeed. But I request your party to remember the



## THE SPOKEN WORD

words of wisdom of a great British Prime Minister. When the Nazis were knocking at the doors of England during the time of the Second World War, he too had visions of victory. He said-those words are now famous-"in war determination, in peace goodwill, in defeat defiance, but in victory magnanimity."

If you are victorious in these elections, as you hope to be, you must, and I repeat you must, be magnanimous to all sections of society. Victory must not breed a sense of arrogance. Only then will you be able to have what you envisage, a gross national contentment, because after the party wins the elections, whatever the party, it must carry the country with it. Victory is good. But integrity of the country, as a whole is better. "Feel good" is a nice slogan. But I would respectfully suggest "feel happy and feel secure" is a far better slogan.

*Fali S Nariman is a senior advocate and a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha*

## Burning Brains display real courage

UNION Health minister Sushma Swaraj banned tobacco advertising on May 1. Yet, in Chandigarh, a ridiculous scenario unfurls every year. A leading cigarette company, Godrej Phillips India gives away "Red and White Bravery Awards," as part of their "social initiative programme". This event has been taking place since the past twelve years. Senior government officials are invited to present these awards under a glare of media publicity.

It was left to a group of committed young volunteers from the Burning Brains Society to protest.

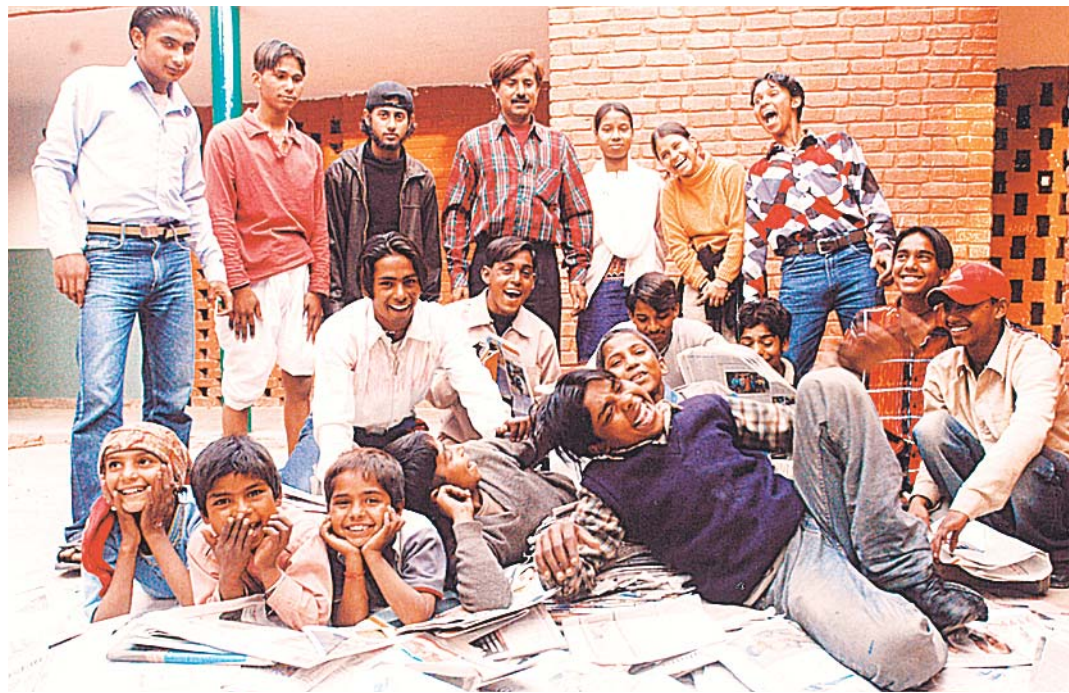
They positioned themselves, with placards, near the entrance of a plush hotel where the awards ceremony was taking place and stopped the Punjab Governor and the UT Administrator, Justice O P Verma (retd), this year's VVIP, from going in.

The group's leader, Hemant Goswami, told him, "You should not attend this function. You are indirectly promoting a cigarette brand and thus smoking. Such bravery shows by a cigarette company can influence impressionable minds." Verma admitted he had a point but proceeded to give away the awards, anyway.

Hemant and his group are naturally furious. There is no dearth of young smokers in the city. "We struggle to raise money for our motivational programmes and workshops for youngsters. But here is a cigarette company doing their surrogate advertising, impressing people with their 'social initiative' and we have the Governor, the Chief Secretary of Haryana and the Army Commander as guests of honour," Hemant told Civil Society.

*Rathi Menon, Chandigarh*

## Zulfi doesn't give up, School comes from wastepaper



Zulfi and his children with their paper mountain

SOUNDS unbelievable but Zulfiqar Khan, who runs a school for slum children in Chandigarh, is funding his with donations of raddi, or wastepaper. After selling the paper, Zulfi buys books, food, uniforms and pays salaries to his teachers.

"I have about 100 houses in Chandigarh, 20 in Mohali and 25 in Panchkula. Mrs Walia in Panchkula collects newspapers from all the houses in her area and brings it to us. Her pile alone, gives us two and half quintals of waste paper," he says, beaming.

Zulfi got his bright idea from an article in The Tribune last year. "Chandigarh is remarkable. It must be the only place where media persons have not only written about the project, but also contributed to it," he says.

Public support grew when Zulfi's children staged a play at Punjab University's Law Auditorium in January. In the audience were

principals of some of the city's schools. One invited Zulfi and his children to visit his school. Another requested them to stage a play.

S K Setia, a Chandigarh administration official, wrote a personal letter to all government and private schools requesting them to donate their wastepaper to Zulfi. "Now we have six schools as members. My policy is that if children understand that we can use waste to get books, clothes and food for children just like them, it will remain in their psyche," he says.

With 150 members in his raddi club, Zulfi is able to raise Rs 7,000 a month. But he needs another Rs 10,000 for his 25 children, including Rs 4,000 each for the two teachers. This is where people like litterateur Dr V Mehndiratta and Dr Raman Abrol pitch in. They give Zulfi their raddi, plus some extra money. Contact Zulfi at 0172-3132900.

*Rathi Menon in Chandigarh*

## Finally, another term for Bhure Lal

BHURE Lal will continue to head the Supreme Court's committee on pollution in Delhi. His term ended recently with him being appointed member of the UPSC. Thereafter the government was free to propose a successor. Bhure Lal, it was argued, could not hold two posts.

The government's choice as

successor was the former chairman of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), Dilip Biswas. One version is that Biswas was called to the ministry and offered the assignment. Another version is that Biswas lobbied for the job because of its high profile nature. The committee has the right to intercede and report on a number

of matters pertaining to pollution. Air pollution in itself has become a politically sensitive issue. Sheila Dikshit is seen as having having won her election on clean air.

But Biswas' candidature did not pass muster in court. He was not regarded as an adequate substitute for the combative Bhure Lal. The problem was to get around the two posts issue. Could Bhure Lal be a

member of the UPSC and yet head the pollution committee was the question.

The Supreme Court finally decided that he could on the grounds that UPSC members do take up consultancies.

So, finally, Bhure Lal it was and Delhi will hopefully see more tough decisions to wake up the slothful administration and curb pollution.

## Good driver, good school

BOLLYWOOD has always banked on the power of love. In "Munnabhai" a box office money-spinner, Sunjay Dutt, the hero of the film cheats his way into medical college and cures people with a "jaddu ki jhappi" (magical hug). The sweeper of the hospital gets well with Munnabhai's prescription. He tells the impersonal principal, "I have worked here for 20 years, but you still don't know my name."

It was a very enlightened principal at the Doon Public School in Panchkula, who saw

to it that the annual day function not only felicitated students and teachers but also recognised the services of Class IV employees.

The school's bus driver Vajinder Kumar received this year's Best Employee Award and he also got a warm 'jaddu ki jhappi' from the guest of honour, Dr G S Randhawa, former Vice Chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University. Teachers, parents and children clapped enthusiastically.

"Right from our inception, we had this policy of honouring our Class IV



employees. For the school is a large, joint family where everyone contributes to its success and well-being," points

out the principal, Captain Sanjay Anand (retd). The school has decided to gift Vajendra a bus from the next

academic session.

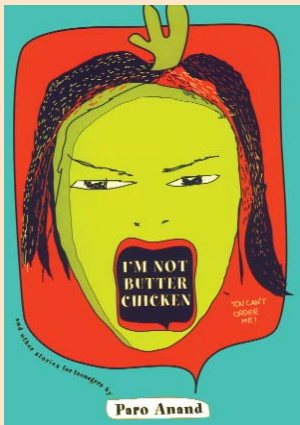
"The bus will be in the school's name but the earnings will be entirely his," says the vice principal, Sunita Anand.

Teg Bahadur, the school's Man Friday was the first to receive this award. Satyavan, who keeps the school's premises clean, got it last year. A wristwatch, new uniform and a memento are given. The winners can also decide which gift their heart desires. So Satyavan got a much needed pressure cooker for his home. Vajinder, of course, is getting another career. The warm hug, he says, was magical.

*Rathi Menon, Chandigarh*

# 'I'm not butter chicken. You can't order me!'

AASTHI BHARTIA



**I'm Not Butter Chicken**  
Paro Anand  
IndiaInk  
Rs 150

I remember devouring Enid Blyton's books when I was young. She wrote of English families and old English boarding schools. Treacle puddings and meat pies were entirely alien to me but were still part of an entertaining, fantastic world. As I passed through adolescence, her books became increasingly annoying. The protagonists were largely unbelievable rosy-cheeked model children who listened to their model mothers.

If there was any conflict, it had an all too obvious moral.

Paro Anand's screaming, yet honest teenagers, on the other hand, are soothing examples for a teenager's conscience. Her characters are glaringly contemporary. They pretend to faint during exams and cheat. They deal with peer pressure, abusive older brothers, juvenile delinquency, divorce, and death.

Having conducted workshops with children in Tihar jail and in Kashmir, Anand knows only too well that children today are forced to confront very adult issues.

The very first story goes through an entire roller coaster of emotions in just twenty minutes of a teenager's life.

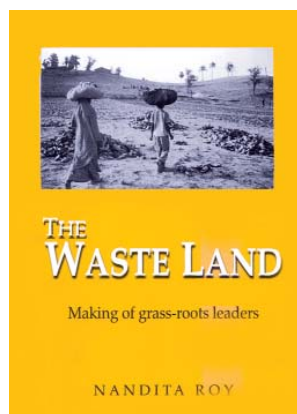
"I'm not butter chicken. You can't order me!" teenaged Nitya screams at her father. Later, sitting in her room, reflecting on her "smart-alecky comment" Nitya thinks, "I wonder if all tongues are as restless or it just mine?" Then, hearing her parents laugh downstairs, she feels alone and uncared for. Slowly, tears roll down her cheeks, she pictures her own funeral, "Maybe if her life were to come to a sudden stop. Then, oh then, they would realise that they had wronged her terribly." Hearing her mother call out to her, she finally tiptoes down the stairs. Within minutes, she is sitting between her parents, watching TV - "laughing, as though nothing had happened." True to life, the big spat in the story ends as quickly as it began.

Despite her winning perceptivity, Anand is, after all, an adult and adolescents are natural skeptics of adult advice. If a 'moral' or a piece of 'advice' lie behind her stories, they could be misconstrued as insidious adult preaching. However, Anand takes her reader's skepticism into account. After each story, she devotes a candid paragraph to 'Where this Story Came From'. After 'Babloo's Bhabhi,' a story about an abusive older brother who beats his wife, Anand reflects on how violence begets violence in children. She concludes, "I strongly believe... that children are not helpless little people, but powerful instruments of change. Through my stories, I would like to empower my readers and make them take control of their own destinies."

Unlike most adults, Anand does not question children's intelligence. Instead, she identifies with their perception of the world. She understands that a child's mind is "a mysterious place" and tries to "go there on instinct, without intellectualizing too much about it." Her stories are recommended reading not only for teenagers, but for parents, teachers, and anyone else who interacts with them.

# Heroes you would never have heard of

RITA ANAND



**The Waste Land**  
Nandita Roy  
National Foundation  
for India and Seva Mandir  
Rs 250

THIS book is about India's true leaders.

They come from anonymous villages around Udaipur in Rajasthan. Despite poverty, they changed power structures in villages, often at great personal risk. The compassion, intelligence and courage shown by them are a lesson for young people aspiring to be leaders in urban areas. The people profiled are recipients of the Umed Mal Lodha award, instituted in 2000. Lodha, an agriculturist, worked with Seva Mandir and provided leadership to the NGO's natural resource programme.

Seva Mandir has been greening forests and developing wastelands in areas around Udaipur since 1985. When the government launched the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme and issued national watershed guidelines Seva Mandir realised this was an opportunity for people to

manage their natural resources. But they also knew that a people's movement to regenerate forests would never take off, because 80% of common land was either encroached or occupied by powerful families in the village.

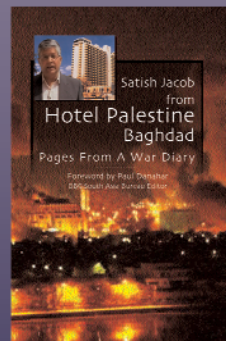
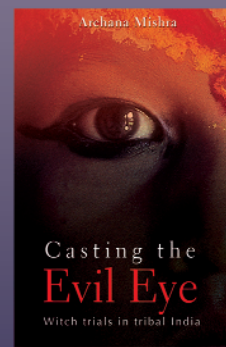
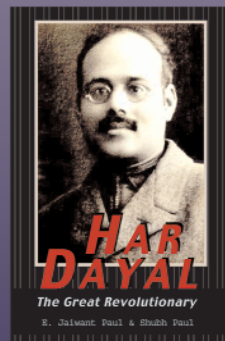
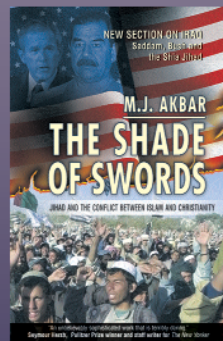
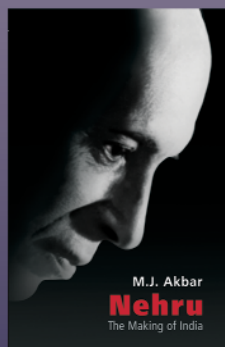
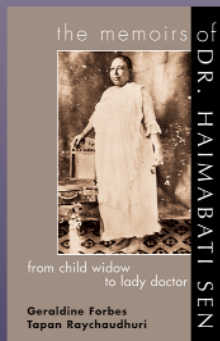
Freeing that land, which villagers traditionally used for fuel and fodder was crucial. Seva Mandir employed local people in their forestry programme paying them a stipend. It also backed several collectives such as the Van Uthan, a federation of 40 forest protection committees. Grassroots leaders emerged as a result. Read about Shivlal, an adivasi who took on an evil soapstone mine owner called Bhanwar Singh and freed pasture land belonging to the village.

Or Jalum Chand, a forest worker with Seva Mandir, who resolved differences between two hamlets over a lift irrigation facility and a forest, despite murder charges being slapped on him. There is also Himmat Shrimali, van sahayak with Seva Mandir, who brokered peace between three villages over a 175 hectare forest.

There is the heroic story of Susheela Devi. She motivated women to build a mud road, so that a school could be constructed.

Roy has also profiled collective action. A former journalist, she has written simply and interestingly. In contrast, the book's title, cover and pictures are bland.

## Books that make a difference... Titles from the Lotus Collection



www.rolibooks.com

ROLI BOOKS

# Laughter in the time of conflict

JUG SURAIYA

**I**n Romain Gary's *The Dance of Genghis Cohn*, the eponymous protagonist, a Jewish comedian, faces a Nazi extermination squad. As the guns are raised, the doomed man turns and presents his bare posterior to his killers, exhorting them to kiss it. By this seemingly futile gesture of defiance, the helpless victim turns the tables on his vanquishers. Cohn's soul leaves his bullet-ridden body and comes to roost within the Nazi officer. Gary's message is clear: by refusing to acquiesce in his inevitable destruction, the seedy clown achieves a subversive after-life.

The parable of Genghis Cohn (the name itself is a cross-cultural pun underlining the universality of the hero/victim) suggests the use of laughter as an instrument of liberation. As Hannah Arendt and others reflecting on the Holocaust have stressed, language assumes progressive importance as the conditions it seeks to describe become increasingly unspeakable; silence represents the irreversible triumph of the oppressor. Of all the forms of communication which attempt to bear witness to the embattled human condition, perhaps none is as potent as laughter. Laughter is the revenge of the ant against the elephant which seeks to stomp it into oblivion, the incongruity of the act exerting the force of a moral ju-jitsu to throw the disproportionately powerful aggressor into ridicule. Little wonder that laughter is taboo under all totalitarian dispensations.

A distinction needs to be made between the mechanics of humour and the spirit of satire. Humour is a man stepping on a banana peel; satire is created when the man stepping on a banana skin is the corrupt municipal official who has been cutting corners on garbage removal and now is about to be hoist with his own petard, or peel. Satire is

humour with a moral cutting edge and walks the tightrope between the individual and the collective, freedom and necessity, faith and despair, the mask of comedy that slips to show the grinning skull beneath the skin. Humour depends on the conditioned response; satire creates an unconditional response to circumscription. (While both Hitler and Stalin were patrons of the predictable robotics of slapstick, the Man of Steel developed an Achilles' heel in the form of an irreverent mouse called Mickey, and Hitler met his match in a Little Tramp who stood the Great Dictator on his head.) Paronomasia, the so-called lowest form of wit, exemplifies the dual nature of satire. At its best, the pun acts as a semantic zip fastener to bring together opposing and apparently contradictory elements to form an unseamly – pun intended – whole which is larger and more meaningful than the sum of its parts, a gestalt in which jest is revealed as truth, and vice versa. The resultant tension seeks release via the safety valve of laughter, which often with pain is fraught. If satire is a cruel business, it is so only because life is. If cruelty – including the ultimate cruelty of mortality – were to be taken from it, life might conceivably be worth living; but it would no longer be worth satirising. Which would be a pity, if one accepts the definition of the human animal as a creature whose humanity consists of his capacity to laugh and to cry, and not always to know the one from the other.

This business of satire, of laughing because we seem no longer to be able to weep, becomes all the more necessary in what euphemistically are called "troubled times", when more than ever our common humanity is at stake. But it is at such times that laughter is most frowned upon: at best, it is seen to be an inappropriate and insensitive frivolity; at worst, a catalyst likely further to provoke already inflamed passions. Such arguments gain vehemence whenever religious issues are involved, and

particularly so in the context of those who are deemed patronisingly to lack in "sophistication", and by implication in a sense of humour, which is another word for humanity. You can't make fun of religion and get away with it, say those who mouth the conventional wisdom, pointing an admonitory finger at Salman Rushdie. Such caveats beg several questions, not the least of which is that Rushdie's plight has no longer anything to do with religion and everything to do with the politics of religion, which is an entirely different issue. Christian commentators on the Rushdie affair, however, should note Umberto Eco's fictional thesis that Catholicism suppressed Aristotle's apocryphal treatise on laughter lest its pagan influence undermine the absolute authority of the Church.

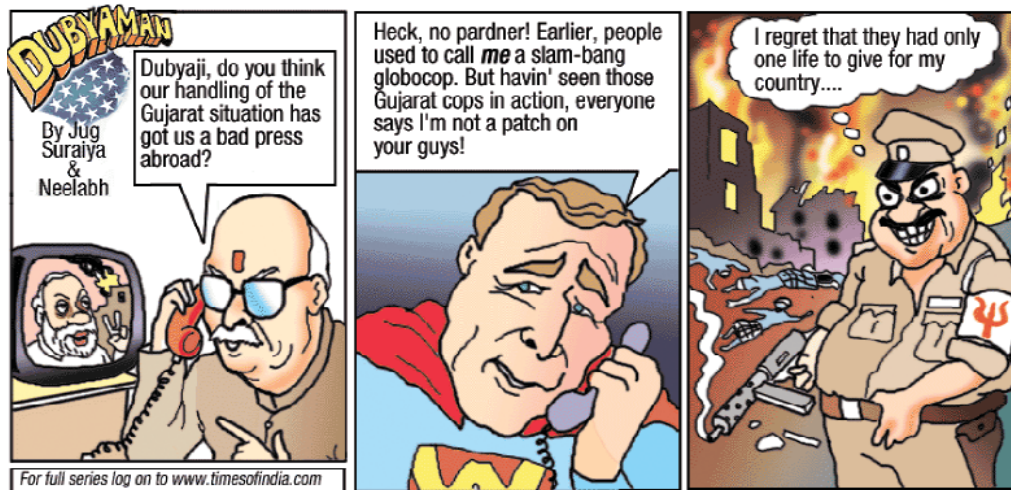
The "unsophisticated" of the so-called Third World have long taken delight in religion (as distinct from religiosity) which is resonant with a virile laughter, be it occasioned by Sufi fables, the enigmatic koans of Zen Buddhism, the impudent escapades of Nand Gopal or the homespun parables of Ramakrishna. This playful aspect of religion has found intriguing echoes in the world of post-Newtonian physics. God does not play dice with the Universe, pronounced Einstein, to which his friend and fellow physicist, Niels Bohr, replied: Will you please stop telling God what to do?

And if quantum theory is to be believed, what God likes to do is to pun with the world. In the ambiguous light of the "new physics", the world is viewed not as a rigidly defined, homogeneously organised and well policed state of things but a participative happening, characterised by a cast seemingly borrowed from the theatre of the absurd: subatomic

particles like "tachyons" which are assumed to travel faster than light and therefore move backward in time, or "charmed quarks", the ultimate building blocks of the universe, which are not really matter at all but "hypothetical events" which may or may not take place. (The word "quark" has been borrowed, appositely enough, from James Joyce's comic classic *Finnegans Wake*, the title a pun on the quick and the dead.)

Confronted with the question how "real" is "reality," science has adopted an idiom suspiciously similar to that of mysticism – or of comedy. "Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our percepts. What we perceive depends on what we look for. What we look for depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality." Or, as Groucho Marx almost put it: I would not care to join any reality which would have me as a member.

Laughter it seems is serious business, and the more serious things become, the greater is the role of laughter. It is not a reaction to the scheme of things, but an abreaction, an exorcism of the very real fears and anxieties, the animosities and the prejudices which those who silence laughter would have us believe are our inescapable lot. With our backs against the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Genghis Cohn, we can either accept our culpability in the form of the condemned man's blindfold, or wave it away, together with the offer of a last cigarette – the latter on the grounds that smoking is likely to prove injurious to longevity. Laughter is the best revenge – and the final triumph – of civil society.



**Laughter is the revenge of the ant against the elephant which seeks to stomp it into oblivion, the incongruity of the act exerting the force of a moral ju-jitsu to throw the disproportionately powerful aggressor into ridicule. Little wonder that laughter is taboo under all totalitarian dispensations**