

Civil Society

ELECTION SPECIAL



NGOs IN POLITICS

They are checking out candidates. Is it time they stood for election themselves?



COVER STORY

A NEW POLITICS
 NGOs have plunged into electoral process. Some like the NBA and Medha Patkar are supporting candidates. Others are checking out the antecedents of aspirants. **8**

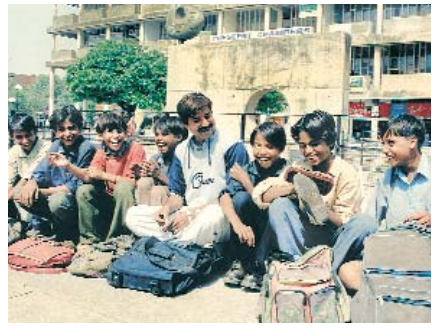
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Cover Photograph by SAAB Pictures

Civil Society

It's everyone's India

Of course doubts persist about how effective NGOs can be in raising issues, checking out candidates and taking away votes to affect the outcome of an election. There is also the strong view that NGOs should stop short of involvements with real-time politics and limit themselves to raising social awareness, which can then lead to change in the political system. But for all these doubts, there is also an increasing impatience with the slow pace of change. This impatience is perhaps best seen in Madhusudan Mistry, who decided to become a politician and is now a Congress MP after having been a social activist for two decades. The Eklavya Sanghatan, to which he belonged, has a great record. But the decision to switch came out of frustration. Rallies and demonstrations had led nowhere. Today Mistry says he is more effective because he is in a position to work the levers of power. He told us in an enthusiastic interview over the telephone from Ahmedabad that NGOs need to redefine their own relevance. It is important to be in politics to bring in change.

As always, Civil Society celebrates the near-anonymous social entrepreneur. In Chandigarh we found the fascinating Zulfi, a talented thespian who uses his stagecraft as therapy for drifting shoeshine boys and for lost souls in prison. Zulfi has been around for several years and deserves more support for his efforts. From Uttarkashi, there is the account of a mountain which is literally going to pieces because of the development activities which have been thrust upon it. Roads, buildings, commercial forestry have taken a heavy toll and there have been continuous landslides for the past month. It is a sad story. We are also happy to announce the first of our Digital Divide pages. This is a theme we will be developing. Our Review section looks at the book, Fast Food Nation, which offers intimations of the changes in attitudes that the developed world is experiencing. Should we, too, be taking a second look at the burger and pizza joints which are sprouting up across our cities? We have tried to keep the interest in water harvesting alive with the story on Panchshila Park and two other Delhi colonies. Panchshila's success in raising groundwater levels has shored up property prices and rents in the neighbourhood. Interestingly, it is the elderly of Panchshila Park who have been the most active in bringing in change. Here is a model which many neighbourhoods could examine closely, in Delhi and elsewhere. The JPC on pesticides in cold drinks is the first JPC to involve civil society in a key role. Every now and then there is a trickle of information in the newspapers of how the JPC is proceeding, reports it is seeking and so on. Sharad Pawar, the JPC's chairman, does officially give the media some idea of what is happening. We felt it is important to track the proceedings on the basis of the little that has been made public.

Umesh Anand

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Write to Civil Society at E-2144 Palam Vihar, Gurgaon, Haryana 122017
 Ph: 9811787772, E-mail: civil_society@rediffmail.com Editor: Rita Anand

CAUSE & EFFECT

Food dept. boss is transferred

Civil Society News
New Delhi

SUMATI Mehta, Commissioner for Food and Civil supplies has been transferred apparently after the confusion over applications made by the public for details of ration shop owners records.

The applications were filed under the Right to Information Act and, processed as they had been through the Commissioner for Public Grievances, should have been honoured in the normal course. Mehta's office, however, sat on the applications. This became the cause of unnecessary embarrassment to the Sheila Dikshit government, which has championed the cause of right to information.

The right to information campaign has been led at street level by Parivartan, an NGO of young people inspired by Arvind Kejriwal, an income-tax officer on

The campaign by Parivartan on ration shop records had become difficult to ignore

against Mehta was that she had allowed elements in her department to collude with unscrupulous ration shop dealers.

The ration shop dealers' case virtually brought the implementation of the Right to Information Act to a standstill because the food department did not bother to contest the dealers.

A public demonstration at the food department and reports in the media saw the government acting to separate the applications against which the court had been moved from subsequent applications for ration shop records. It was agreed to allow scrutiny of the records, but when Parivartan activists Anand and Rajiv went to the food department's office in East Delhi to do so, they were assaulted on the premises. (See Civil Society October issue.)

It appears from the incident that the ration shop owners had been allowed to gather at the food department's office in full knowledge of the fact that the Parivartan activists would be going there to see the records.

Mehta's transfer came suddenly. It followed sudden urgency by her office to sort out Parivartan's demands. As it transpired, Parivartan met her one Thursday after an SOS from her on the phone and went back the next day for a second meeting to find that she had been transferred.

Her place has been taken by Ashok Kumar. The right to information campaign, at least with regard to ration records, seems to be on track. But interestingly, threats by the ration shop dealers and the attack on the Parivartan activists has resulted in many poor people withdrawing their applications out of fear.

two years leave from his job. (See Civil Society September issue.)

Mehta's unwillingness to act on petitions brought before her by Parivartan on behalf of extremely poor and underprivileged people resulted in the matter landing in court. The charge

Are Coke, Pepsi caught in ADI fix?

Some surprises as JPC begins hearings

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IF you thought the hearings of the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on pesticide traces in Coca-Cola and Pepsi would lead nowhere, think again. This JPC has been hard at work and what it is getting into could lead to a whole new look at water quality, pesticides in the food chain and corporate responsibilities in relation to public health.

This is also the first JPC which has witnessed the active involvement of civil society. JPC Chief Sharad Pawar told reporters that a presentation by the Centre for Science and Environment had been impressive and pragmatic for fruit juices and Indian agriculture.

CSE had done the original tests on the colas, but its laboratory's findings had been questioned by Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Government scientists appearing before the JPC have, however, refused to junk CSE's findings. In fact, members of the JPC say, CSE's elaborate presentation to them has prompted a thorough look at pesticides in food.

The cola companies, on the other hand, have not sought to appear before the JPC. Members of Parliament are surprised at this reticence since it is the companies that have claimed to be the injured parties. Now the JPC may have no choice left but to summon the two companies.

If this happens, they will have to explain many claims they have been making in their advertising and in press briefings. High on the list of questions will be one related to the ADI argument, which Coca-Cola and Pepsi have used to explain away the pesticide traces in their drinks as being negligible.

What is ADI? To begin with, it stands for average daily intake. But perhaps you should get to know this powerful acronym a little better because it sums up what you ingest by way of fluids and solids. And since you are what you consume, the quality of your life depends on whether

you get your ADI right or wrong. A healthy individual needs a healthy diet with a balance of foods and the chemicals that come with them. Mess with this balance and you land in trouble.

Now, ADI has hung around unused for decades in drab literature on standards and nutrition. But in the past year, prime time status has been bestowed upon ADI. It all began with

pesticide traces. The quantities of food consumed and the pesticide traces found in those quantities are added up to constitute the ADI.

An individual needs meat, vegetables, milk and so on. What we have, therefore, is a set of foods with their nutritional values, pesticide traces and average consumption. Add a bottle of Coke or Pepsi to this and the balance changes drastically. In fact, your child could be consuming from Coke or Pepsi alone several times the pesticide load that would normally come with an entire day's consumption of food.

Since Coke and Pepsi cannot be counted as food, and are not looked upon as food anywhere else in the world, it is being asked whether the pesticide load they bring with them can at all be included in the ADI. To do so would be to equate it with milk or fruit juice, which may have pesticide traces in them but also provide nutrition.

So, Coke and Pepsi were right when they told the public that ADI is everything. But looked at closely, ADI may not add up to anything for Coke and Pepsi.

MYSTERY REPORTS: The JPC hearings have thrown up a hitherto unknown testing of Coke and Pepsi samples conducted on the eve of the findings released by CSE in August. These tests were conducted by government laboratories in great haste days before the CSE report was released. The tests showed there were no pesticides in the drinks.

But when CSE released its report, the government at no point said that it had already conducted tests. Union health minister Sushma Swaraj did not reveal this to Parliament.

Several questions arise about these tests:

Why were tests conducted in such haste days before the CSE released its report? Was someone trying to preempt CSE?

Why did the government remain silent about the tests?

How did the same government laboratories, which did not find pesticides in that set of samples, find pesticides in the samples tested later?



SAAB Pictures

Sharad Pawar told reporters that a presentation by CSE had been impressive and pragmatic

the findings of pesticide traces in bottled water and then again in soft drinks. Coca-Cola and Pepsi spokespersons argued at length that standards should be set on the basis of how much is safe to consume. Pesticides, they said, are to be found in just about everything from milk to beer to apples to mutton. The important thing, they stressed, is get the ADI right.

Now ADI is back to haunt them. The CSE presentation before the JPC took parliamentarians to the essence of ADI. All food intake standards across the globe are set keeping in mind what an individual needs to consume. Since pesticides exist everywhere, limits are set for the pes-

ANUPAM MISHRA



A MOUNTAIN IN PIECES

Varunavat in Uttarkashi is collapsing on surrounding areas

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Varunavat, a mountain in Uttarkashi is crumbling. Since September 25, there have been continuous landslides and the sound of rocks breaking is heard day and night. Boulders are rolling down to the road.

The district headquarters, a school and about four hotels have been damaged by the falling debris and three hundred people displaced. Telephone lines have gone dead and now the area survives on a few wireless in local loop (WiLL) connections.

Ours first hand information on Uttarkashi comes from Anupam Mishra, secretary, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, who went there recently as part of a team. Mishra is a grassroots environment researcher with exceptional work in water to his name.

Varunavat's problems have a history. Following the earthquake in 1991, cracks had appeared on the hillside. The heavy rains this year did not bring landslides. But a particularly massive thunderstorm on 24 September seemed to be the trigger for the collapse now in evidence. Since then, the sides of the mountain have not stopped giving way.

Every mountain has a tolerance level. Problems begin when human interference with its natural structure go beyond this point. Mishra says the carrying capacity of Varunavat was never considered. After the Chinese aggression of 1962, the government went on a road-building spree for defence purposes. A road cutting into the hillside was built rather hurriedly in the 1970s. No environmental impact assessment was carried out.

The district administration gave out 400 pattas (land titles) to various people who wanted to settle on the hill, ignoring local opinion. Varunavat is not deforested. It is covered with pine trees, rhododendrons and oak. But the plantation of pine trees is for extraction of resin and the roots of these trees don't hold down the soil.

The question being asked is where will all the silt from the collapsing hillside go? Obviously, straight down the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers and into the Tehri dam. "Did the Tehri dam experts take into account this additional load of silt, prior to constructing the dam," asks Mishra.

The district administration is seeking engineering solutions for stabilising the mountain. Perhaps this will be the source for further problems. "The mountain has been burdened enough," remarks Mishra, "it needs rest. There

is just one solution and that is to leave it alone."

The hill state of Uttaranchal's fragile eco-system is under threat. Over the years, religious pilgrimages have been replaced by tourism, says Mishra. Travellers want to stay at fancy hotels and not in the traditional dharamshalas. Water has to be lifted to these places. The number of visitors to the Gangotri and Yamunotri glaciers has increased many times. It is well-known that the glaciers are receding. Garbage is dumped indiscriminately close to the glaciers. A big ecological footprint is left behind.

Uttaranchal has a natural disaster management ministry financed by the World Bank, but it does not seem to have any sense as to what is going on. Local people remark cynically that the administration is getting worked up only because the district headquarters were destroyed. Otherwise landslides in Uttarakhand have become a common occurrence that the local authorities ignore.

For instance, Mori village in the interiors, grows nearly Rs 2 crore worth of potatoes every year. Landslides there have caused nine deaths. The road has remained blocked for nearly two years and the administration has not bothered. Mori clearly does not matter.

Theatre can be therapy

Zulfi shows how with shoeshine boys and prison inmates

Rathi Menon
Chandigarh

THIS Khan never made it to Bollywood, but his story could well be the subject of a film. Zulfiqar Khan [Zulfi to those in his circle] is a theatre actor-director who has chosen to use his talents to transform slum children into literate and confident teenagers and give depressed prisoners a sense of purpose.

Zulfi's group is called Theatre Age and consists of boys from the slums. He has often thought of abandoning his mission because of financial difficulties, but it is an old passion which goes back to his days at the Department of Indian Theatre at Punjab University here.

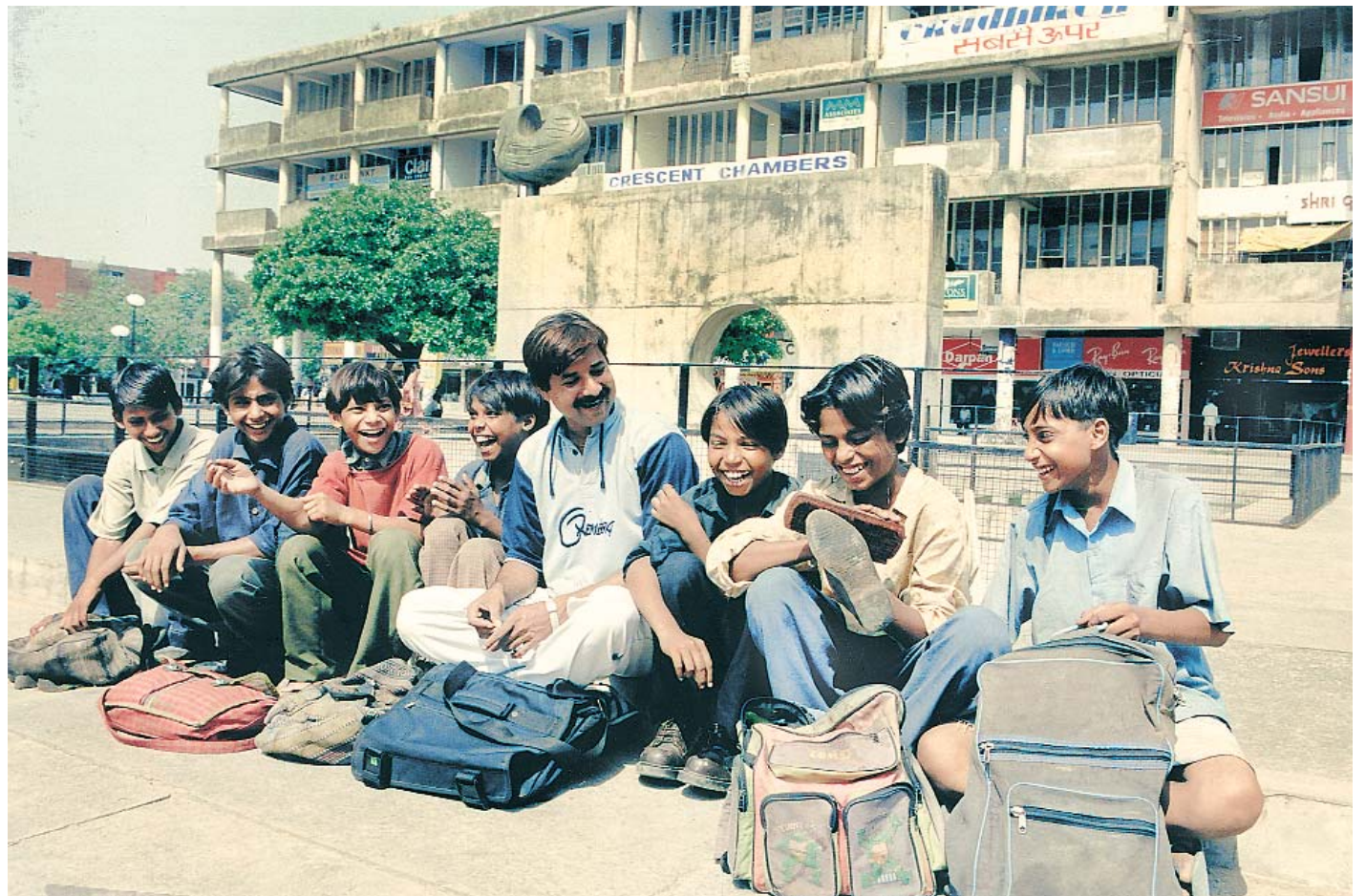
While doing research on plays under the veteran Mohan Maharishi, as part of a UGC programme, he began gathering the shoeshine boys and hawkers of the city's posh Sector 17 market who lived in the city's biggest slum, Janata Colony.

Zulfi could have gone the way of many other students as he had his training at the Sriram Repertory under stalwarts like the late B V Karanth and Habib Tanvir. Instead he got busy with names like Ajay, Ravi, Vijay and Amarpal who came to him in search of an identity and purpose in life.

Till they met him, they spent their free time either selling movie tickets in the black or quarrelling in the streets. But the first play that Theatre Age staged way back in 1993 changed everything, even for Zulfi. Then slowly boys began to flock to him and, to his shock, Zulfi found 90 per cent of them hooked on drugs. The leader of that group is now Zulfi's right hand man.

Ajay Rana, a tall strapping young man, is the success story of Zulfi's unique drug de-addiction programme, that of weaning them away from the 'nasha' of drugs and introducing them to the 'nasha' of 'taliyan'. "Recognition can play a big role on such children's psyche.

When Ajay came to me, he was in a bad shape, taking whatever he could get hold of. I gave him a role in our second production, 'Shyamu', which was on literacy and since the play was a success and we took it to all the corners of Chandigarh, people began to recognise him. That did the trick."



Zulfi's shoeshine boys and other children at their school

There were street plays on lottery gambling, on the exploitation of society in the name of politics and on AIDS.

The Chandigarh Administration bestowed on Zulfi the award of Best Creative Person.

to eat, then we have lunch. Otherwise we know we will get it in the school."

So school starts with a meal and then besides the basics, they have art and of course theatre. The children who were so shy of meeting even their teachers now

hold painting exhibitions and stage plays. Thanks to the city's well-known artist Prem Singh, they had a taste of the College of Art here when he conducted a workshop for them. Since Singh was the Principal, he made them attend the classes with the regular students and interact with them.

The children became so confident of themselves that at the end of it they not only had an exhibition but agreed to make

a mural for the café at the Lake Club. And their joy knew no bounds when the then Administrator, Lt Gen [Retd] J F R Jacob, unveiled the mural and shared tea and snacks with them. "Now their paintings adorn the walls of the offices of the Advisor and the DPI [Schools] who gave a special order to us," says a proud Zulfi.

Zulfi's brand of theatre has always

thrived on connectivity. Hence it was no different at the Burail Model Jail when the inmates staged a play directed by Zulfi after a fortnight-long workshop. Titled 'Allahwalon Raamwalon' the play was on communal harmony and the audience often forgot that the actors in front of them consisted of those convicts who were undergoing life imprisonment or facing even the death sentence. The dedication was such that two of them whose parole began during the workshop came regularly for the rehearsal.

Baljit Singh, one of them, told Civil Society after the play, "We feel we should have been involved in such activities earlier so that our mind and brain could have been diverted elsewhere. Though it was for the first time I participated in a play I feel confident enough to take it up as a full-time profession when I am released."

Words of remorse flowed from many other quarters as the young Vijay Sethi who was part of the background chorus noted, "I lost my father during my stay here. Now I am about to be released. My only aim in life is to take care of my mother and take up music as my profession."

Besides making them aware of the better side of life, Zulfi managed to get clearance from the Administrator, Justice[Retd] O P Verma, for setting up an Entertainment Club in the jail. For all the sweating out with hardcore criminals for more than two weeks, this was the only remuneration. "Just as we said in the play that religion is to make good human beings out of you, I stress that theatre also has the same purpose."



The cast of prisoners after the performance at Burail Model Jail

With the help of his boys and a few good Samaritans of Chandigarh, he set up a school for them in their Janata Colony. Titled 'Ashiana'. The school has become a refuge for slum children, who are mostly out working as shoeshine boys.

As the brightest among them, Surjan and Johnny, pointed out, "We reach home by one o'clock and if there is something

RAIN SAVED IS RENT IN THE BANK

Civil Society News
New Delhi

In 1998, Panchshila Park in south Delhi fell on bad days. There was shortage of water, plenty of garbage and rapacious builders lurking around. The local club collapsed and rentals declined. The rich and famous fled. A new and younger managing committee took over that year and surveyed the scene. They were 60 plus, whereas the earlier committee members were 80 something.

The new committee rolled up their sleeves and got down to work. In five years, Panchshila colony has implemented some of the most modern and talked about systems in the world. Nearly 50% of the colony's residents are senior citizens who simply want their grandchildren to inherit a clean environment.

To tackle depleting groundwater, a rainwater harvesting system has been installed, increasing the water table by a metre in just one year. A garbage disposal system prevents 290 tonnes from travelling to a landfill site, every year. Now residents want to set up their own sewage treatment plant instead of dumping it all in the Yamuna. Nearly 78 (check) percent of pollution in the river consists of sewage and if other colonies follow suit, the river will be that much cleaner.

"Water is everything," says Krishan Sehgal, president of the Panchshila Cooperative House Building Society. "If you don't have it, you have nothing".

Investments in water have yielded rich returns. Rentals have shot up by 15 percent, say residents. "The severe water crisis in south Delhi, including our colony had scared away prospective tenants," admits local resident RL Bawa. "once word spread

that we had started harvesting rain and our water table has risen, rentals jumped." Panchshila Club's sparkling blue pool does not spend Rs80,000 to buy water from the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) anymore.

The colony was built by RP Burman, a retired chief engineer of the PWD, with wide roads, lots of greenery and seven parks. Burman realised how important water is and designed a water distribution system consisting of five tubewells, drains for stormwater and rainwater, sewage lines and irrigation water to all plots. The club, spread over five acres was built, to earn an income. There was also a door-to-door kitchen garbage collection service.

From 1980 the colony started going downhill. As the colony got more crowded, the quantity and quality of water

declined. Chemicals and fertilisers used for gardening seeped into groundwater. Builders choked storm water drains with malba, leading to water logging. Civic services collapsed. The resident's association tried, without any luck, to prevent officials from sanctioning further construction.

The new Managing Committee which got elected in 1998 decided to first revive the sagging fortunes of the club. They did not want to depend on the government for money.

ML Sood, a former chief engineer irrigation, then a sprightly 95-year-old, suggested rain water-harvesting. The Managing Committee liked the idea and scouted around for details. They approached the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) and the DJB who showed them designs of cement and concrete.

The committee members sadly shook their heads. Too ugly and too costly. Then they visited Vasant Vihar's rainwater harvesting project, but found it unsuitable. GD Saigal, 80 years old, proposed a borewell which could filter the water and recharge the aquifer. This idea found favour.

The Committee approached the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and found their rates much cheaper. As an experiment, Rs one lakh was spent on rooftop water-harvesting in the club and local school. This proved successful. The committee went ahead and extended water harvesting to the entire colony. CSE designed 36 recharge wells at Rs 6.5 lakhs. The cost was divided among the residents. Each person paid only Rs 160.

The water is now at 26.6 metres, and the water-table has risen by seven percent.

"Small schemes generated by the old could be a model for the rest of Delhi" he says.



Krishan Sehgal at the Panchshila Club

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Is pressure harvesting better?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

To recharge aquifers instantly, several agencies are promoting pressure harvesting. In traditional methods, structures are built so that water from the catchment area flows in according to gravity. The new pressure machines, on the other hand, send water into the aquifers at a much faster rate.

Several experts prefer this method. They say water is not lost in the process. "Gravity recharge structures start overflowing during heavy rains since water seeps into the ground at a slow pace," says Manu Bhatnagar of Intach, "as a result a lot of water is lost."

Besides, water is soaked up by surrounding vegetation or by the soil. "In pressure harvesting we drill right up to the level of the aquifer so there is no loss," says Bhatnagar.

Pentair an American multinational manufactures pressure harvesters. "These can be installed in small areas," says Sanjay Sapra of Pentair, "they send more water into the aquifers than natural

structures built in a bigger area. Pressure harvesters are therefore more useful in an urban landscape."

But unlike the older methods, the new harvesters are expensive. Sapra says household harvesters can cost anywhere between Rs 60,000 and Rs 2 lakhs. For large institutional areas the price can go up to Rs 5 lakhs.

But Saumitra Mukherjee of Jawaharlal Nehru University's (JNU) Centre for Environment Studies prefers the older methods. "The aquifers can sustain only a certain pressure. This is fixed by nature and that's why water percolates down at a particular pace," he says

However, if aquifers are in dire need of an immediate supply of water then pressure harvesting can be resorted to, says Mukherjee. "But the geology of the area should be studied carefully to find out whether the aquifer can withstand influx at a faster rate." A CGWB official agreed with this assessment. "Some agencies just want to cash in on the growing market for rain water harvesting structures," he said.

And you can do it yourself

Residents of Shivalik, a colony in south Delhi, are certain that a few more showers of rain will revive their dead tubewells and reduce their dependence on Delhi Jal Board's (DJB) scarce supply. About 2 percent of Delhiites collected each and every drop of torrential rain this year and the residents of Shivalik are proud to be part of the group.

"Before the monsoon we installed recharge wells in five parks of the colony, at a total cost of just Rs 55,000 which was shared by all the residents," says LL Bhandari, member of the local RWA, "we got rid of the annual menace of water-logging as the water would go gushing into the earth".

Building these structures has not been easy. Initially, the residents approached government agencies like the DJB and the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) to get designs for rainwater harvesting. When nobody helped, Bhandari, a former chairman of ONGC, decided to use his own knowledge of geology to create the structures.

"Catching the rain is a very simple and inexpensive process. But the benefits of harvesting and the ill effects of letting the water flow away, are enormous," he says.

After every heavy shower, local residents especially children, would run to the colony's park to watch rainwater surging down the recharge wells. Another resident observed that the parks looked much greener, this year.

A higher water table will reduce electricity bills for running tube wells. According to the CGWB, if the water table falls by a meter, a person requires an extra 0.4 kw of power to draw water.

Today the RWA is examining requests for help from neighbouring colonies who want to replicate their water harvesting structures.

CIVIL SOCIETY PICTURE BY MKSS



Aruna Roy spreads the MKSS message of accountability and transparency in Rajasthan

A NEW POLITICS

A Civil Society examines the role NGOs are playing in the run-up to the December Assembly elections

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AS the curtain goes up on assembly elections in the five states of Delhi, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh, Mizoram and Madhya Pradesh, new actors have wandered out of the wings. Non-government organisations (NGOs) have decided to give themselves a political role. Some are putting up their own candidates and trying to shape political agendas, others are working to ensure a cleaner election.

For the first time in the history of Indian elections, candidates for political office have to give detailed information to voters about their criminal record, financial assets and liabilities and educational qualifications. The Election Commission issued an order on

27 March 2003, that these details have to be filed on a sworn affidavit before the Returning Officer with the candidate's nomination papers.

How much of a difference NGO involvement will make remains to be seen. Local mafias and big money are known to drive elections. Getting the truth out about a candidate sounds good on paper and on websites, but in reality transparency may be harder to achieve. When it comes to standing for elections, NGOs face the problem of funds and inexperience. They don't have political networks and end up contesting too few seats.

An interesting case to watch will be that of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). At a press conference in New Delhi, in September, Medha Patkar announced that the NBA would support candidates from the Samajwadi Jan Parishad and the Kranti Dal to wean

away decisive votes from the Congress and Chief Minister Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh.

Medha feels that Digvijay Singh's government has not done anything for the rehabilitation of the people evicted from the site of the dam. She also wanted him to oppose the raising of the dam's height. But with just a few seats in its sights, will the NBA be able to push its agenda?

Medha's announcement took NGOs by surprise. Many feel that the social sector should not stand for elections or back political candidates. Their role must be restricted to ensuring transparency, accountability and helping people make an informed choice.

"We are totally against people from the voluntary sector standing for elections," says Anil K Singh, secretary of Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), a network of 2000 voluntary organizations, "people make a clear distinction between development and politics. Help them to vote without fear, but don't say vote for so and so."

There are others, like Aruna Roy of the MKSS who have a different opinion.

"We support the NBA position as it emphasises the relationship between development strategies and mainstream politics, the basic structure that decides on such issues," she said. People's campaigns and mainstream politics are not exclusive of each other, says

Roy. If movements like the NBA do not have their own political party, the only other way they can influence government is by placing their agenda before people's representatives in Parliament or the Assembly.

THEN AND NOW: Historically, the line dividing politics and voluntary action has always been thin. During the freedom struggle, the line did not exist at all. Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave were activists and politicians. After 1947, many activists joined politics while others, like Gandhi, opted for social action. But the relationship continued. Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi often consulted Vinobha Bhave. Numerous people's movements, like the All-India Kisan Sabha, or the All-India Trade Union, became political entities over a period of time.

As many NGOs now see it, in recent years, the distance between the common man and the government has grown. The agenda of political parties does not reflect the aspirations of the people. While the state is withdrawing from its responsibilities to citizens, the voluntary sector is moving in.

POLITICAL MINEFIELD: There have been attempts in the past ten years by activists to join politics. According to Anil K Singh, during the Assembly elections in Bihar in 1992-93 nearly 40 activists stood for elections as independents, disillusioned with the corrupt and inept system of governance.

"Not even one person won," says Singh.

In the last general elections, too, NGO candidates were routed at the polls. The Ekta Parishad in Madhya Pradesh, put up 35 candidates. They were all rejected. A respected activist in Thane district, who had a large following of tribals, lost by a record margin to a local mafia don.

Post-elections VANI set up a task force under PV Rajagopal of the Ekta Parishad to analyse this defeat. They visited each candidate's constituency to study the situation before and after the elections. They analysed the effect it had on the voluntary sector and published a report of their findings.

"People don't see activists as politicians. Without preparing the ground, suddenly activists jump into the fray," says Singh. The local NGO wins the confidence of the people they work for. But when their members join politics, or back candidates, the people feel let down and become suspicious. They think the NGO is nursing employees who want to be politicians. Many times the activists deny their political aspirations and suddenly decide to contest, surprising everyone.

The reputation of the organisation gets tarnished. Funding agencies inquire whether their money was used to run an election campaign. The NGO may have a hard time explaining the truth and winning back their confidence.

Employees of the organisation feel cheated. They wonder if they have been promoting a co-worker's political ambitions, rather than furthering the NGO's cause. When the activist loses the elections, he finds himself without a job and wants to rejoin former colleagues. Often the defeated activist has to face the wrath of the local mafia which had resented the added competition.

"If the voluntary sector is serious about good people joining politics, it should develop a support mechanism, like a corporate fund to support them," says Singh.

He says VANI is not against electoral politics. "We believe in democracy and

understand the need for good people to join politics and we support them. But we are against activists from the voluntary sector participating directly in elections." If an activist decides to enter politics, he should remain there. "My advice to them is gain experience in panchayat or municipal elections, make an impact and then try for the Assembly," says Singh.

Civil society is very powerful in building public opinion. In a tacit way, NGOs have contributed to the BJP's defeat in Uttaranchal, admits Singh. But he doubts whether candidates backed by NGOs will carry forward their development agenda. "Politics is about power, not causes," says Singh.

OUTSIDE, INSIDE: Certainly there are many advantages of avoiding the electoral minefield. From the margins, NGOs can influence the policies and programmes of all political parties, across the board. "We are practicing good politics," says Anupam Mishra, secretary of the Gandhi Peace Foundation.

"We have researched water for twenty years. Now everybody talks about water-harvesting, from the Prime Minister to the Supreme Court. I would say we are practising good politics," he says.

In India, according to Mishra, society can change only through service. Since our

CIVIL SOCIETY PICTURE BY MKSS



Winds of change: NGOs reach out to the young with the message of clean politics, the importance of the vote, communal harmony, the right to work and the right to information

system of governance is still very colonial, people who join tend to become corrupt. It is better to steer clear of political ambitions.

"In 1974, Jayaprakash Narayan decided to put up a people's candidate. Sharad Yadav was chosen, the local Sarvodaya unit campaigned for him. He won, but is this the politics of someone backed by JP?" asks Mishra.

In 1991 in Wardha zilla, says Mishra, a Gandhian candidate stood for elections and the Sarvodaya unit campaigned for him. He barely got 500 votes. "No social worker has won an election on his own. A good NGO can back a candidate or lend support from outside, but he or she should not himself stand there," says Mishra.

He believes the power equation between people and the state should change. The government should just be a facilitator and return power to the people. Politics is therefore irrelevant.

"Earlier, Indian society was like an NGO. It was a decentralised system. If villages built tanks the state withdrew certain taxes so that the community could accumulate reserves to build more tanks. Today the government tells the people, we have designed and decided the programme, come join us."

The government does not have an agenda or a budget and it is shaky on implementation. He narrates this incident: "The Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Mission spent



“We have researched water for twenty years. Now everybody talks about water-harvesting, from the Prime Minister to the Supreme Court. I would say we are practising good politics,” says Anupam Mishra

Rs 300 to Rs 400 crores in Madhya Pradesh on watershed development. Now what is watershed development? Drought still occurred. Then the Pani Roko Abhiyan was launched: a simple slogan which caught on. About Rs 100 crores was spent, the people contributed and 20,000 talabs were built in eight or nine months. A National Watershed Development Agency sits on Rs 16,000 crores. But successful water management came when people built tanks.”

THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT: “NGOs are also political in the fact that they vote, take positions on development, fight against inequality, get involved in the politics of the poor and so on,” says Aruna Roy.

Roy describes the major campaigns led by the MKSS in Rajasthan, as peoples 'political' movements. “The right to information movement is a basic democratic movement and cannot be outside the purview of political

“We are against activists participating directly in elections,” says Anil K Singh

VANI guide for fighting elections

The Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), representing 2000 NGOs has issued guidelines for activists who want to contest the coming polls:

1. Be frank about your intentions, inform your organisation and resign at least two years ahead of the elections.
2. If you lose don't return to your former employer.
3. Use your own money for campaigning and be transparent about its source.

4. Support the causes you upheld and the values and principles you stood for.
5. Be secular and don't be casteist.
6. Begin your new career by contesting municipal and panchayat elections, gain experience and make an impact locally.

For organisations who take part in politics by supporting certain candidates, VANI has this

message:

1. Educate the electorate on their right to vote and their responsibilities.

2. Do whatever you can to promote clean politics and free and fair elections

3. Train people in leadership skills, so that better people contest.

4. Support independent candidates fighting for a just cause.

5. Be non-partisan

concerns. It addresses governance and ethics. The right to food, the right to work and other campaigns have come from people's action and mobilisation on drought. The growing importance of human rights concerns has a lot to do with the women's movement and the struggles of dalit organisations,” she says.

The politics of the poor and electoral politics are related. NGOs who work with marginalised groups are often in direct confrontation with the state. If we see people's movements and electoral politics as having no relationship with each other, politics will suffer, explains Aruna. “If NGOs do not understand the nature of their political involvement, the political parties do not comprehend their role as social activists. We have to have socio-political movements and politico-social action,” she says.

The decision of any movement to back certain candidates is because they understand the issues they are raising are political. They want their candidates to be accountable to the electorate.

If the politician is seen as a person with no moral values, the government will also not have any commitment to ethical standards. “We have to redefine politics and also see the responsibility we all bear as citizens in a democracy to make the system work better,” says Aruna.

ROTTEN TO THE CORE: “The electoral process is so rotten that it has continued to ward off many people from even considering standing for election. It pre-supposes that those who stand will be willing to sacrifice all values to win,” she says.

Others agree. “The electoral system does not require a change of players, but a change in the rules of the game,” says Jayaprakash Narayan of Lok Satta, “most politicians are not crooked, they are merely victims of a vicious cycle”. This is why better people go to the Rajya Sabha, he says.

Sanjay Kaul of People's Action in Gurgaon points out that the electoral system

discourages people from contesting polls. To get a ticket is tough since politician's sons or relatives get preference. He says NGOs are learning the rules of the game from the politician's club. The Election Commission's order will be the first step to gain entry.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Harsh Mander, the country director of Action Aid, left the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) to become full-time activist after the Gujarat riots. He believes that NGOs have a role to play as conscience keepers and sensitisers. Political roles he sees as legitimate provided activists go all the way.

“Elected representatives derive their source of legitimacy from the people, however flawed the electoral process may be. Likewise, civil servants are selected by an impartial process,” says Mander. “But NGOs are neither elected nor selected. Their legitimacy is the most tenuous. It is derived from their own claim to integrity and self-assertion of their right to fight for a just world. Hence this legitimacy is the most open to challenge. NGOs have to be more transparent than others. When people engage in politics, but retain their primary location in the NGO sector, this is untenable. They should enrich politics all the way.”

“To influence the system you should join politics. I have made many changes. The general mindset is that if you are an NGO you are good. If you crossover you are bad.”

“It was a big personal risk, like plunging into deep water. I may have drowned. The biggest limiting factor of NGOs is that they are not willing to take risk.”

Meet Madhusudan Mistry, once activist, now MP and happy with the crossover

*Madhusudan Mistry, Congress MP from the Sabarkantha constituency in Gujarat, is one of the very few who have made the crossover into politics from the NGO sector. After spending over 20 years working with Oxfam and then the Eklavya Sangathan, Mistry joined Shantersinh Vaghela's Rashtriya Janata Party and worked as state party president before standing for election from Sabarkantha. His party subsequently merged with the Congress. **Civil Society** talked to him about his new career as a politician and how he had made the transition from being a social activist:*

Do you think NGO activists should join politics?

It depends on the work the NGO is doing and the issues it is raising. Some NGOs work on welfare and development and there is very little contact with the state. But if you are working on larger issues and need to play a bigger role and have day-to-day functioning with the state, you should enter politics. It depends on your aims, nature of your work and the peoples' perceptions about you.

In our work, the state came in, so we formed a political party in 1992-1993. But many people backed out. We worked on regularisation of forest land, payment of minimum wages, enforcement of laws, bribery and corruption in forests. We took out protests with thousands of people, went to court. All this requires a lot of time and involvement and the returns may not be much. We fought for ten long years. My own role in the NGO sector goes back over 20 to 30 years. I realised that if you want to influence the entire system you have to get into politics.

How difficult was it to make the transition?

I am happy. I have made many changes. You see the general mindset is that if you are an NGO you are good. And if you crossover you are bad. It does not seem to matter that as an NGO you go to meet politicians through the backdoor to get things done. Personally I have had very bitter experiences with my own colleagues. I got branded for becoming a politician, but I don't mind. I have a particular ideology.

The crossover was also a huge personal risk. Joining politics was like taking a plunge into deep water. I may have drowned. My entire career was at risk. The biggest limiting factor of NGOs is that they are not willing to take risks. They want ten days' advance notice. You don't have it in politics. You lose your family, friends especially if you are in the top rung. You are answerable for every deed of your party.

What advice would you give activists who want to join politics?

You have to make your own space within the political party. We have intellectual capacity and a following of our own. Parties need intellectual workers and persons who can work round the clock. It's a lot of hard work, not like working for an NGO. There is no job security. Political parties are heterogeneous entities, every section of society is present, each trying to have its say. From trade unions to internal lobbies, everyone is at work. If you represent for the marginalised you have to put their viewpoint across. It isn't easy and it is not everyone's cup of tea.

Do people have one kind



of expectations from an NGO leader and another from a politician?

People knew me well. Their expectations have actually increased. Being an MP they come to me for every petty issue. I always listen to them. I'm always under pressure from 7 am to late night. It's not easy. I have nearly 1.2 million people in my constituency.

What have you achieved by joining politics?

For the first time all agricultural workers will be provided an identity card in Gujarat. This will make them eligible for all government schemes. We have implemented this, certainly things are a bit tardy, but the decision is historic in itself. Agricultural workers have been toiling on land for years with no rights. Now, 32000 of them have

from candidates? Can NGOs monitor this process?

I am in favour of it. It should be mandatory. It can improve as we go along. NGOs may not be fully equipped to be good monitors. They have to know how parties function and what happens during campaigning. There are issues like bogus voting and booth-capturing. The information an NGO has at its command is not always adequate. Anybody can file a case. In politics anything can happen. NGOs must therefore safeguard against unjust disclosures.

What is the role that NGOs can play in relation to the political system?

NGOs are highly focused on one issue, they work on specifics. Out of 13 tehsils they will work in one. Out of 100 villages they will cover only 20. They have a tunnel vision. They don't know the problems of illiteracy, of running the system, industrial problems. If I tell them, I'm giving you Rs 500 crore, design your idea, run the health system, they can't do it. If allopathy is not good, there are other systems, take it to the people, the state is giving the money.

Where NGOs can really help is in providing information. Issues like GM seeds, global negotiations, WTO...they can provide highly effective information in improving the system.

You also need thousands of NGOs for a country our size. The number of NGOs we have is very small. Go to any part of the country from Jammu and Kashmir to Kanyakumari, you will find a political party supporter, but not an NGO. That difference is huge.

cards. We have put the issue of common property resources and how the state should manage these on the party's agenda. Even our manifesto for district elections shows this. We see districts as autonomous units with their own policies and programmes for land use, water etc

I can influence the budgetary process and make it more pro-people. We are in the opposition now, but when we are in power we can implement budgetary changes.

You need to understand your constituency. Where money is spent, where it is coming from, who gets what benefits from taxes, then you can make suggestions

What is your view of the Election Commission order seeking disclosures

ELECTION WATCH

Things about your leaders you were afraid till now to ask

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IN Delhi, an Election Watch committee of 20-odd NGOs and concerned citizens has been formed to ensure that the Election Commission's orders are followed. Transparency and information, they hope, will usher in cleaner politics, better politicians and an enlightened voter population.

"We have appealed to all citizens to volunteer any information they have about likely candidates so that we can start the screening process before the nominations have been filed," said KC Sivaramakrishnan, convenor, "our screening committee will disseminate it to voters."

The Congress party reacted. The party announced they had decided to weed out ticket seekers at the ticket distribution stage. Aspirants will have to furnish affidavits in all five states. These will be checked out by the Central Election Commission. The Election Commission will scan the affidavits and put them on their website. (<http://www.eci.gov.in>) after the last date of filing nominations on November 14. Vote Smart India had approached the EC for doing this and developed software for creating a database and a quick analysis. The DEW will provide an analysis to voters.

SWEEPING DISCLOSURES: There are differences of opinion among NGO groups about how far the new EC order will clean up the system. "This is not going to transform public life but is part of a process of people gaining control by knowing about their candidates," says Harsh Mander, Country Director, ActionAid India.

The disclosure on educational qualifications has attracted the most flak. "This has a class bias," says Mander. Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta is ambivalent about it. "Some of our finest politicians were people without much education," he says citing examples, "but disclosure is different from qualification. Nobody wants an illiterate democracy. We think people would just like to know."

The disclosure about criminality has the most support. But it has its critics. Rival candidates or their sympathisers can file cases against each other.

"It depends on the nature of the crime," says Shekhar Singh of Centre for Equity Studies, "is it rape, murder or a petty offence? The world over the trend is to reform criminals."

"This is an excessively political correct argument," counters Jayaprakash, "Lok Satta has put in place verifiable standards which examine conviction. The Election Watch committees will verify all information given by the public, along with documentary proof and only then will the information put in the public domain," he assures. NGO groups point out the time is too short for thorough verification.

The financial disclosures are the hardest to crack. Mostly income tax returns would be filed. But black money and benami property are unlikely to be put on the table. "The honest politician will admit that he owns considerable assets but the dishonest one may declare very little," says Jayaprakash, "we will rely on public perception of local MLAs."

"Unlike the Americans, Indians are accommodating and forgiving by nature,"

Jayaprakash observes. "We are also reasonable and trust people." He believes if politicians are honest about their financial assets, the people will forgive minor sins.

The Centre for Equity is more cautious. Shekhar Singh has decided to track affidavits after the elections are over. "This will give us time and scope to carefully investigate if all claims are true," says Shekhar, "if we find they are incorrect we will file cases under the Representation of People Act (RPA)." The centre is also planning to acquire transcripts of proceedings in the Assembly to find out how much MLAs participated and what questions they raised. They will analyse how MLAs spent their development funds in their constituencies.

"Transparency is not a magic wand," says Mander, "more accountability may not be realistic. The Election Commission's order implies a change in power relations. Questions can be asked of the candidate, unthinkable a few years ago. The affidavits



Harsh Mander of Action Aid says Election Watch is a process well begun

commit them on record. At least we have something to check out."

REALITY CHECK: Jayaprakash says so far political parties have been selling dreams, like in Bollywood films. There is money, liquor, the mafia and the stars. An aura is created. The ruling party tries to bamboozle the opposition. All this action should go. The politician must face the voter and set a people's agenda.

According to the Centre for Civil Society's Delhi Citizens Handbook, nearly 40% of Delhi's citizens do not have access to sewerage and 25% do not get water supply from the Delhi Jal Board. About 500,000 children living in slums do not go to school. More than 90% of diseases in the city are waterborne and the doctor-to-patient ratio is 1:598. There are 20,000 legal medical practitioners and 40,000 quacks.

The Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) runs an annual loss of Rs 25 crore and the DJB Rs 2 crore. Water supplied to Delhi households is six times costlier than what they pay for. In addition, the middle-class complains about corruption, apathy in the bureaucracy and pot-holed roads.

There is scope here for partnerships between people, NGOs and politicians. "People have expectations but no platform to voice them," says Arvind Kejriwal of Parivartan, "so politicians take up inconsequential issues." If people and their representative talk to each other more often, accountability can be assured on an ongoing basis.

The DEW committee will bring voters and candidates face-to-face to discuss the agenda of the local MLA. "Normally candidates call the meeting and voters go. We want to see if candidates come if voters call the meeting," says Sivaramakrishnan. About 15 "Meet Your Candidates" meetings are planned.

In Sundernagari, a resettlement colony in the Seemapuri constituency of East Delhi, a public debate between residents and the aspiring MLAs is planned. People can then tell the MLA what they expect from him, or they can discuss the MLA's own agenda. The Centre for Equity studies has volunteered to study the constituency and help people frame relevant questions for the MLAs.

The DEW committee will encourage more people in Delhi to vote. "The higher the income, the fewer the numbers of votes," says Sivaramakrishnan. In posh colonies, the voter turnout is only about 18%. Hauz Khas records the lowest. DEW plans a door-to-door go out and vote campaign in partnership with Resident Welfare Associations.

VANISHING NAMES: Bogus voters on the electoral roll are every candidate's nightmare. Under the First Past The Post system (FPTP) the person who gets the most votes wins, so the margin of victory is very narrow sometimes as low as 0.7%. Fake votes can tilt the balance. In Andhra Pradesh, says Jay Prakash 40% are fake and in rural areas 15%.

Parivartan undertook a house to house survey to check the fidelity of electoral rolls in four polling booths in Sundernagari resettlement colony of Seemapuri constituency in East Delhi. The total errors in any polling booth ranged from 23% to 45%.

The names of several residents were missing, and this formed the biggest group. The second biggest list was of people who were not residents of the area. Either they had moved to another area, or these were bogus votes. There were also people who found

SAAB Pictures

Toss-up on Digvijay

Medha wants to punish him, Ekta Parishad goes with him

Civil Society News
Bhopal

IN Madhya Pradesh much has changed over the past five years in the way NGOs view Digvijay Singh. Even at the beginning of his second term in power, the sheen was very much there, a chief minister who spoke of decentralisation through panchayati raj, of the need for water harvesting and of land reforms to benefit dalits.

But today at the eve of elections in the state, the two major groupings of NGOs in the state— the NBA and its affiliates and the Ekta Parishad - have taken very differing stands on their roles in the elections. And for the first time the support to the Digvijay Singh regime is not unalloyed.

The stand of the Ekta Parishad was clearly expressed at a conclave in Damoh in September where the national convener of Ekta Parishad, P.V. Rajgopal, announced his organisation's unconditional support to the Digvijay Singh Government. Rajgopal claimed the Digvijay government was consistently working for the uplift of the poor, the landless, Dalits and tribals. He added the State Government has championed the objectives of Ekta Parishad. Rajgopal said by distributing land among the landless belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and giving rights over forest, water and land to the tribals, the Congress Government in Madhya Pradesh has worked for the cause of the downtrodden. For completing the unfinished tasks, he said, it is essential that the Digvijay Singh led Congress government gets re-elected.

The NBA on the other hand, as has been reported in earlier issues on these pages, has backed a loose confederation of NGOs working among tribals which will be putting up their own candidates for these elections. These candidates will be fighting the elections independent of the Congress and in most cases, given the largely tribal constituencies where they will contest, they will inflict the maximum damage to the local Congress candidate.

For neither NGO grouping

has this been an easy journey. In a mid-2000 interview, Rajgopal speaking about Madhya Pradesh said, "In MP, social legislation and policies that are meant for the poor like the Land Ceiling Act, Minimum Wages Act, equal wages for equal work, Adivasi Suraksha etc have not been implement-

drastically different. From finding the MP government more sympathetic than any other government they were dealing with in the early days of the struggle to finally concluding that the state government was doing little more than paying lip service to the idea of rehabilitating the oustees of the

an implementing agency in several districts of the state to facilitate the land distribution programme under the Digvijay government's 'dalit agenda'.

Flawed though the programme remains, and the Ekta Parishad itself admits that in the absence of any move to implement the Land Ceiling Act, such interven-

organizations working with other dam oustees along the Narmada, such as those displaced by the Bargi dam, have been drawn into the NBA umbrella. Several other activists who had started work in the state with the NBA have moved to other areas of the state to organize tribals around other issues.

As the MP government has moved to a position that was mildly sympathetic to the NBA stand to one where it has literally washed its hands off R&R work in the state, the NBA has found itself increasingly being forced to confront Digvijay's administration. The hypocrisy in the state government's stand on land for R&R work itself becomes clear from its statement before the Supreme Court over the lack of land for resettling the oustees. Ever since stating so before the SC, the state government has managed to find and distribute over two lakh hectares of land among dalits. Moreover, activists working among tribals have also been at the receiving end of some rather brutal treatment from Digvijay's police.

This has literally forced the NBA affiliates, despite their strong opposition to the Sangh Parivar, to put up candidates of their own for these Assembly elections. The NBA in turn has endorsed candidates being put up by the Samajwadi Jan Parishad in the districts of Harda, Betul, Mandla and Rewa.

For the Congress, which is crucially dependent on its tribal support, the NBA challenge, not because it may sweep the polls, is worrisome because it indicates a growing disenchantment with the party in these areas. The NGO groupings are not the only indication that tribal dissatisfaction with the current administration runs deep. The Gondwana Gantantra Party, a party arguing for a separate Gond identity, almost a counter-hindutva position, has emerged as a major challenger to the Congress. Its spread has been made possible by the kind of grassroot work often recommended by the NGO movement — organization of micro-credit facilities based on women self help groups and the setting up of a network of schools.



ed. Secondly, anti-poor policies are being implemented with full enthusiasm. Through the industrialisation policy, people are being deprived of land, water and forest. The third problem is the World Bank-backed social forestry project, which has displaced more than 4.5 lakh people." Notably, there has been very little progress on many of these issues, but certainly Rajgopal's views about the government have altered radically.

For the NBA, the situation is

Narmada dam projects, the NBA affiliates have traveled in quite the opposite direction from the Ekta Parishad.

At the heart of this difference between the two large NGO groupings in the state is the way in which they have evolved. From working with the dacoits in the Chambal to the extensive work on land right for dalits the Ekta Parishad has seen an enormous growth in its reach across the state. The Ekta Parishad through its task forces has also directly intervened as

tion will remain limited, the dalit agenda has managed to actually transfer some resources to people who have been landless for much of their past.

The NBA on the other hand has grown for an organization that began to organize the people being affected by the Saradar Sarovar Project. In due course the work has expanded to organizing facilities to affected tribals abandoned by the government, such as schools in areas that can now only be approached by boat. Affiliated

HOW THE ELECTION RULES CHANGED

The Supreme Court's order and the Election Commission's subsequent directive owe their origin a petition moved by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) formed by faculty members of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad.

They first went to the High Court in Ahmedabad to change nomination forms so that a candidate would be required to tell whether there were cases pending against him.

Altogether there are 700 legislators, MLA, MLC and MPs in the country who are history sheeters.

A recent study commissioned by the Election Commission states that the top four candidates in many constituencies spent about Rs 80 to Rs100 lakhs each during Lok Sabha elections. The election law did disqualify people who committed heinous crimes but there was no method by which an ordinary voter could get this information.

The court agreed that every voter had the fundamental right to know such information and ordered the Election Commission to secure from candidates details about their criminal antecedents, financial assets and educational background.

But the Government of India challenged the decision of the Ahmedabad High Court in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court upheld the directives of the High Court and told the Election Commission to issue a public notification making it compulsory for all candidates to give this information. If the

candidate concealed this information, the Returning Officer could reject nomination papers. The Election Commission issued the court's order.

The politicians rejected the new directives and issued an ordinance to nullify the Election Commission's notification and amend the election law. The amended election law required only winning candidates to declare their personal assets and liabilities before the chairperson of the House. The disclosure on education was removed and limits were set on how much information the candidate needed to give about his criminal background.

Many citizens groups united under the National Campaign for Electoral Reform and approached the Supreme Court against this decision. A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court upheld the sanctity of the voters right to know and declared Parliament could not alter laws in order to take away a citizens right to know—a part of the right to freedom of speech and expression guaranteed by Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution. But it took note of the objection by politicians to rejection of nomination forms by the Returning Officer on the financial assets and liabilities disclosures of a candidate.

The Election Commission's order states these details have to be filed on a sworn affidavit before the Returning Officer with the candidate's nomination papers. Candidates have to sign a sworn affidavit before a magistrate, a notary public or a

commissioner of oaths appointed by the High Court and furnish the following details.

Whether the candidate has been convicted of any criminal offence in the past and if so has he been punished with imprisonment or fine.

Six months before filing the nomination whether the candidate is accused in any pending case of any offence punishable with imprisonment for two years or more and in which charges are framed or cognisance taken by the court of law. If so details have to be given

The assets, moveable, immovable, bank balance etc of a candidate and of his or her spouse and dependents.

Liabilities, if any, particularly dues pertaining to any public financial institution or government.

The educational qualifications of the candidates.

If the candidate does not disclose such information, his nomination papers can be rejected by the Returning Officer. These affidavits have to be displayed on the notice board of the Returning Officers office and copies can be freely circulated to other candidates and to the media. If any rival candidate provides incriminating information on a sworn affidavit, it will also be displayed on the notice board. But a candidate's nomination cannot be rejected if his disclosure about his financial assets and liabilities are disputed by other candidates or by the public.

YATRA DIARY

Pluralism from a hefty truck

Sowmya Kidambi
Devdungri, Rajasthan

WE were 35 people off on a "truck yatra" to communicate with ordinary people on the streets, and with students in schools and colleges. The name itself provoked comment and comparisons with the "rath yatras", "vijay yatras," and "parivartan yatras" that are the campaign vehicles of so many of the political parties today. The purpose was to reach out to people, begin a dialogue, build platforms, and put to test the conviction we all had, that large numbers of young and old are looking for ways to contribute to creative efforts for change.

In the towns of Mount Abu, Abu Road, Sirohi, Chittorgarh, Bundi, and many others where the Truck Yatra went, the yatris took the message of the "Jan Niti Abhiyan" (a campaign to build a peoples agenda) through, nukkad sabhas, nukkad natak and small public meetings. A "Ghotala Rath" (the chariot of scams) was a part of our bandwagon. It was marvellous means of focussing on the shortcomings of the electoral process and mainstream politics in India.

Issues of importance to peoples movements like the demand for an employment guarantee act, the right to information, and the policies related to the broad canvas of human rights were raised and contrasted with the lack of real issues being taken up by mainstream political parties, even during an election campaign. The primary message to the people was: "Get involved: Governance is far too important to be left to others. There is no other shortcut to an effective and working democracy."

There was learning and teaching, and enjoyment all through. Nothing made us balk, not the living conditions on the move, or the cramped existence for 10 days in the truck

It was a motley crowd. Young and old, men and women, boys and girls, rural and urban; soon became a large joint family travelling for six to eight hours from one place to the next. From the enthusiasm of two elderly and dignified rural men Mohanji and Chamnaramji, as they played the game "Psychiatrist", for the first time; to the

excitement of the urban youth as they discovered the richness of Rajasthani folk music, Kabir Bhajans, and the joy of community singing. The dholak and majira were rarely abandoned, except of course when a rehearsal or discussion was on, or when everyone fell asleep in sheer exhaustion.

Everyone in the group had a task assigned to them. Whether it was 11 year old Chetan, (a Saheriya child from Baran district where last years drought had brought hunger deaths to his village and amongst his friends) or 15 year old Devaki who was from the Barefoot college night school (a three term ex-prime minister of the bal sansad, the famous children's parliament in Tilonia) or Mohanji (one of the older workers of the MKSS a revolutionary dalit poet and a powerful singer) and Chamnaramji from Janavad Panchayat (where he had been instrumental in igniting the imagination of people to take on the administration and the powerful sarpanch to force them to make their accounts public). Chamnaramji's efforts eventually led to proof of Rs 70 lakhs being siphoned off in Janavad -just one of Rajasthan's 9000 Panchayats. No one was allowed to feel left out, or be idle. We went about doing our assigned tasks with a feeling of importance and pride

SPIC MACAY had initially asked Aruna Roy to come and speak to College and school students, and told her that she would be given travel money of Rs. 2,500 for each place she visited --- enough to enable her to travel by an air conditioned car. Aruna however, asked if she could use the same money to hire a truck instead and bring her MKSS colleagues along. She told them that as she worked with a collective it would be best for the children to meet not just her, but also the collective. Only a diverse group could convey the energy and strength of collective campaigns, and inspire young people through an understanding of the varied contributions that go into the making of a people's movement. It also provided an opportunity to meet young people in schools and colleges, and communicate with others in the towns and cities

SPIC MACAY showed a willingness to innovate, and both accepted and supported the idea, and so an entire orchestra of speakers turned up to address school and college students on the issue of "Virasat."

The first sight as the travellers "detrucked" was of a sack being upturned, as a variety of footwear came tumbling out. People scrambled out of the truck, searched for their footwear and promptly set off to do whatever they were assigned. Keeping the footwear in a sack was an unbreakable rule evolved to maintain cleanliness within the truck, which had mattresses laid out on the floor for comparative comfort in travel over bad roads.

"We want to join the movement... how can we help... please tell us what we can do... how can we keep in touch... can we give time during our holidays?" ... More than 600 students from nine educational institutions filled up volunteer forms, indicating their area of interest. Young people had been coming to us over the last few years volunteering their time. What we learnt during the Yatra, was that if you reach out to them, there is a vast pool of energy in search of an outlet. It also explained the success of those huge networks preaching a divisive ideology, who manage to recruit so many young people. Most often, they are the only ones who reach them.

TCS has magic wand, hardly anyone knows

Civil Society News
Panaji

IT SOUNDS a great idea. It looks convincing. Best of all, it's available for free. But lack of awareness among civil society is keeping it from reaching its potential. We're talking about Tata Consultancy Services' software product, which was formulated to fight illiteracy more than two years ago.

If this project by premier software firm Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) can find the right partners and hit critical mass, then the large section of illiterates in India could be converted into productive individuals who can read sign boards, and maybe even the simple text of a newspaper in less than 40 hours of learning time.

TCS believes that the computer can turn into a magic wand of sorts to spread reading skills without the need for a huge army of teachers. Quite some work has already been done by TCS in Andhra Pradesh with Telugu, Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil and Bengali are the other languages it has worked on. And it is now working on Gujarati.

But a lot more is still to be done.

If things really get working on plans like this, India's prize could be high. What's more, there's an added bonus: speed. India could become functionally literate in just three to four years' time, if-and this is a big if-innovative methods like this are vigorously implemented.

How does it work? Simple. TCS uses low-end computers to take out the monotony from teaching, piggy-backing on the initiatives already undertaken by the National Literacy Mission, and treating adults very differently from children when it comes to teaching them.

Since the lessons are packed into a simple CD, it means that any averagely educated person, with dedication of course, can help to make others literate.

Some rules: Don't make an adult sit for tests. Don't get caught up with writing, as the difficulties involved in writing act as a major disincentive. Reading skills are most important. Adults can't be made to study alphabets the same way children take to it unquestioningly.

One-third of India's population-old, young and adults-are illiterate. Some 150-200 million are adult illiterates aged between 15-50 years. Growing at 1.3% per annum roughly, literacy is creeping in too slowly to make a difference for India's efficiency. That's where, says TCS, computers come in.

Software generated by TCS, which is given to volunteer groups free of cost, tries to teach adults to learn to read a language by words, rather than the traditional method of learning by alphabets.

This method's goals are to give a 300-500 word vocabulary to each learner in his or her own language. The idea behind the method is to help adult learners build an association between sounds and their graphic presentation. Familiar words-and their written forms-are broken down into syllables and the written form, finally ending in the alphabet and their sounds. The focus is on learning words rather than alphabets.

Explains a TCS spokesperson: "This method focusses on reading, the most important of the three 'R's in literacy. Once this is achieved, a person can accelerate learning to the other 'R's through the use of the reading skill. In other words, the reading ability is expected to act as a trigger to develop the full measure of literacy."

"There's almost nothing the teacher has to speak. Everything is in the software. So teachers can run 5-6, one-hour classes in a day," says TCS's Major General (Retd) BG Shively.

For further details, contact Anthony Lobo, Tata Consultancy Services, anthonyl@mumbai.tcs.co.in
OR Major General B G Shively, AVSM (Retd), Consulting Advisor, Tata Consultancy Services, Pune; bshively@pune.tcs.co.in. See also <http://www.tataliteracy.com>

Governance gets IT edge

Civil Society News
Bangalore

INFORMATION technology (IT) in good governance? If that sounds like a distant dream for India, take a quick trip to Bangalore, where the Bangalore Action Task Force (BATF) recently demonstrated the use of IT in seven government departments, including transport, police, water supply and telecom. Achievements were greater synergy between departments, increased convenience for the citizen, greater transparency and increase in data quality. In particular, the Karnataka Road Transport Corporation, which used to notch up losses of Rs35 lakh annually, today makes profits of a similar amount.

BATF is a public/private partnership supported by several IT companies, which works to improve the quality of governance in Karnataka, and the demonstration was part of a field visit organised at the 15th Annual National Convention of VANI, held September 24-26 at the Search Training Centre near Bangalore's Bannerghatta National Park. The theme for this year's convention was 'Information Technology And The Voluntary Sector'.

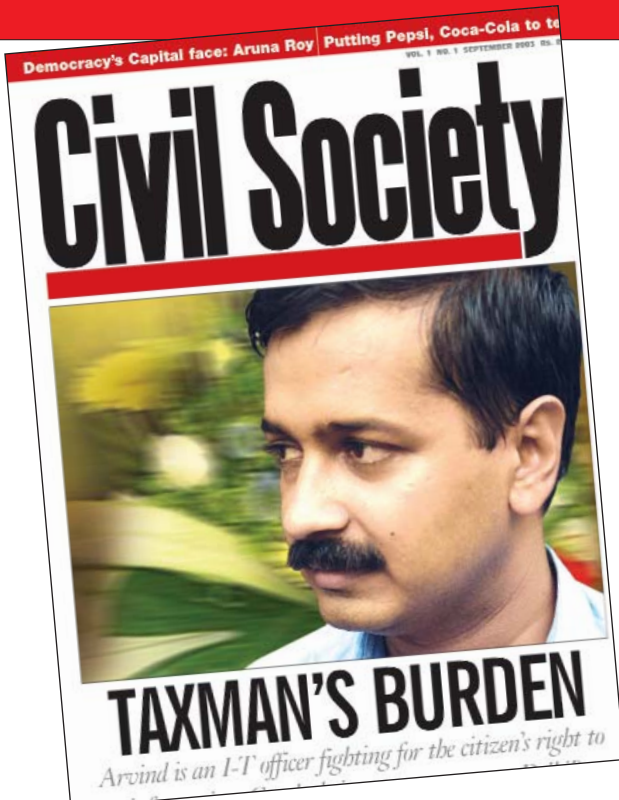
Other field visits included one to a Azim Premji Foundation's Computer Assisted Learning Centre (CLC) in a government primary school and another for a look at the Karnataka government's Bhoomi Programme.

CLC has placed computers in 35 schools, selected on the basis of availability of space and local community contribution. In addition, a local entrepreneur is provided a stipend as a Young India Fellow (YIF) to teach students during school hours and to generate business from the local community at other times. School enrollment has increased as a result, and the several YIFs have been able to break even and even show a profit.

Under the Bhoomi Programme, the Karnataka government has over 180 centres for electronic land records of agricultural and government land and common property. Anyone can collect an RTC for a nominal fee of Rs15. The Bhoomi Project is today making a profit. And it is testing Simputers, a Linux based handheld device, to get data directly from villages.

The VANI convention was addressed by, among others, chairperson Rajesh Tandon, executive secretary Anil K Singh and economist L C Jain. Search executive director F Stephen made a presentation on 'Use Of IT For Development'.

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Civil Society

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Worldspace helps close some gaps

THE WorldSpace Foundation's Africa Learning Channel provides a variety of information on health, climate, agriculture, AIDS/HIV and human rights. Since 2000, the Arid Lands Information Network – East Africa (ALIN-EA) has been encouraging its network to use WorldSpace radio.

Recently, ALIN-EA undertook a research study in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia to assess whether satellite broadcasting technologies were boosting livelihoods for rural communities. Research findings show, NGOs and community workers found WorldSpace important for closing gaps in knowledge but local radio stations were ranked equally high.

WorldSpace is being used mainly for education. For instance, the environment club of the Agret Primary School in Meket, Ethiopia constructed a stove which uses very little firewood, for preparing school meals and ventured into organic farming. The school's patron, Mr. Berhe, said information on the improved stoves, compost pits and solar energy were downloaded from WorldSpace.

The Multi-purpose Training and Community Empowerment Association (MTCEA) promotes adult literacy. They translated articles from WorldSpace into Lusoga for learners. Initiatives are underway to introduce WorldSpace for distance learning in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Media Agency and the ministry of education are negotiating to broadcast some programmes in Amharic.

The researchers also visited three radio stations. Two were using the WorldSpace system. "

A radio station has to be fed with information constantly. However, since we are a community radio, we cannot afford to buy programmes. The WorldSpace thus provides free information to us. It supplements our efforts," informed Henry Lutaya, Station Manager, Kagadi Community Radio.

Community development workers interviewed by researchers identified several shortcomings. The cost of a set, about \$100 is high and so is consumption of power. Lack of spare parts is another issue and respondents suggested manufacturers come up with a simple manual on repairs.

Most WorldSpace content is in English and cannot be understood by rural communities. According to one community worker, "though the information we get from the WorldSpace is very relevant to the poor community we work with, it has to be assimilated, translated and fitted into the local situation."

WorldSpace has taken note. Efforts are on to introduce cheaper receivers. The Foundation will be making information simpler and using illustrations for those with a limited knowledge of English.

None of the four countries involved in the research had satellite broadcasting policies. However, in Ethiopia, the government lowered the tax of the receivers to 19% compared to the usual 40% tax for electronic goods

On its own, WorldSpace cannot meet all the information needs of poor rural communities but can reduce their isolation, conclude the researchers.

www.apc.org

And it's goodbye to Monsanto

DO you remember all those B-movies from the 70's and 80's? "Return of the Killer Tomatoes" and others, that almost created a genre?

Today the great debate on genetically modified (GM) food takes us back to those days of gore and there is now a playfully sinister coinage, "Frankenfood" to remind us of it. The reality is far from amusing. Indeed, there is a major war being fought on this issue and the real battleground is Europe.

On one side are the giant global companies led by Monsanto, Syngenta (whose evolution from Ciba, Geigy, ICI, Zeneca, Astra, etc., is a corporate engineering feat in itself), Bayer Bioscience, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, and the governments they control, chiefly the USA, and others that the Americans have

cajoled and pressurized. On June 23, 2003, President Bush even attacked Europe, which supplies seven times more food aid to sub-saharan Africa than the USA, for being responsible for the famine in Africa.

More knowledgeable about ecology and the environment than their American counterpart, the Europeans in general were very cautious about the acceptance of GM products and questioned their alleged benefits. They wanted tests to be run and debates on the subject before decisions were taken. This did not suit the makers and war ensued. As always, "free trade" laws were brought into play and the Europeans were trapped by the very devices they had helped invent.

The US took the issue to WTO in May and forced the European Commission to provide a time frame to examine the question of GM products after which it would start selling GM products in Europe. Caught between legal pressure from the USA and the will of its own citizens the Commission issued a decision this summer that it would lift the ban on GM Food but subject it to labelling, whereby the consumers were at least aware of what it was buying. Once again, this was not acceptable and the US is threatening legal action saying labelling amounts to "branding GM products with a black skull and bones marks."

In America almost all supermarket food contains GM ingredients but labels show no hint of this. Ironically, this is the country that proclaims, "Customer is King". Polls show that 70% of

Europeans do not want GM products and 94% want to know if it is in what they buy. Can the customer be wrong in this case?

The variance between the European Commission's position and the desire of its people has prompted many separate battles within this larger war. Most of the EU countries are fighting this on a national level trying to create GM-free zones. The European Commission caught in the middle, opposes such individual action and will have to adjudicate when Germany, Sweden, Italy, Denmark and The Netherlands present their own differing national standards. Feelings in France are even more vitriolic and José Bové (France's Anti-Globalization hero,

nicknamed Asterix after the French comic strip character) has been imprisoned for destroying GM crops. The US is trying to force EU's hands in taking legal action against countries such as Austria and the UK who tried to create GM zones.

In the midst of all this The Royal Society in UK has made public this week its findings of a 3 years study (field scale trials) that is apparently quite damaging to the GM lobby in the UK – and consequently in Europe and elsewhere.

Despite minor victories (i.e. Italy's temporary ban against Monsanto last month and the earlier moratorium in Europe) there seemed to be little hope for the opposition to GM food. Now it seems according to Caroline Lucas, the Green Party MEP from the UK, after a meeting in Brussels that "the commission is clearly beginning to accept that GM is a social and political issue – not just an economic one".

For the moment the anti-GM majority can take a short breather as Monsanto announced (unexpectedly by most) this week that it would quit the European Cereal market by closing its UK office. This may be a strategic retreat since it was most certainly losing the public relations battle here. But with many other stalwart GM warriors still remaining in the arena it may be too soon to toast the bubbles.

What could be most interesting is to see how the Blair camp reacts to the results and shows whom they really represent - the British people or Bush and the multinationals.

LETTER FROM EUROPE



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Iraqis unemployed battle for rights

SONGS, poetry, theatre and music marked the end of the Union of Unemployed in Iraq's (UUI) long protest opposite the former Republican Palace. Union members renamed the area, Protest Square. The UUI's heyday, in Baghdad at least, is over.

The UUI demanded jobs or social insurance of \$100 per month to every unemployed worker, the rehabilitation of private and public factories and immediate restoration of public services. This is the eighth unemployment demonstration since early May, none of which have achieved any real progress.

There are 150,000 unemployed workers registered in the UUI, but the total number of unemployed is estimated to be 10 million. Many of them are ex-soldiers,

ex-prisoners of war or unemployed workers.

They cannot afford to pay rent. Families are disintegrating, and many wives are asking for divorce or deserting. "It is her right to do that. I am not providing her, or her two children, with anything," said Yahia Ismael, an ex-soldier who is now handicapped after being shot in his left shoulder in Nasiriyah.

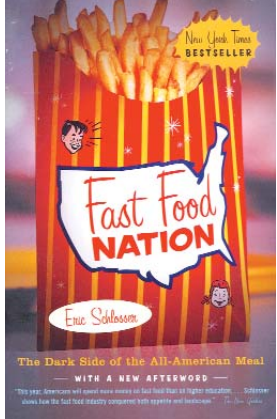
Negotiations with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) led to promises of an emergency benefit of \$100 per month and the supervision of food distribution in Thawra and Nassiriyah. The CPA representatives accused the UUI of being socialists and declared Saddam had been a socialist. The treatment of those arrested further corroded the UUI's hopes.

Members of the Democratic Movement For a Free Iraqi Society, headed by wealthy businessman Abdul Mussan Sharlash appeared on day 40 of the protest. The group promised the protesters jobs. Nearly 70% of the protestors were lured away with a dollar. Those who left called themselves "The Association of the Unemployed". This organization disintegrated a week later and its remorseful members, declared they were desperate to rejoin the UUI.

UUI members say they will continue to struggle till there are social benefits for everybody in Iraq of \$100 per month.

EA Khammas is co-director of the Occupation Watch Centre in Iraq

Muck behind the burger



Fast Food Nation
Author: Eric Schlosser
Publisher: Perennial
Price: Rs 491

By Rita Anand

NEARLY every swank shopping mall opening in India has a few fast food joints. If you want to spend some time with younger people, McDonald's or Pizza Hut is where you will find them.

Many middle-class families today celebrate their little tot's birthday party at a McDonald's. The rates are reasonable and mothers are saved some trouble.

But after reading Eric Schlosser's chilling investigation of the fast food industry in the United States, the cheery ambience of the fast food chains looks like the pretty home in a Hollywood film with an awful ghost inside.

Fast food may seem very hep in India, but in America it is Slow Food which is the new fad. The practitioners of this movement emphasise local cuisine from small factory farms. In recent years, organic produce is also picking up.

Schlosser's book provides a rare inside account of the industry and for us in India it raises the important question of whether fast food and its many ills, not least among them the business practices of companies, should be imported wholesale.

India has the highest number of diabetics in the world and we have a genetic propensity to heart disease. Obesity in urban areas is growing rapidly. Traditional diets are being supplanted by fast food.

The fast food industry employs 3.5 million workers, the largest in America and pays them minimum wages. Many work in horrific conditions in slaughter houses. The industry relies on technology, not human skill. The emphasis is on mass production and uniformity.

In 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food. In 2001, they spent more than \$110 billion. Americans spend more money on fast food than on higher

education, personal computers, computer software or new cars. Every month more than 90 percent of American children eat at McDonald's. The US has the highest rate of obesity of any industrialized nation in the world.

Those hamburgers are most likely made from the meat of worn-out dairy cows in feedlots full of manure. Till 1997, they were fed remains of dead sheep, cattle, dogs and cats bought from animal shelters. Pathogens, e coli and salmonella, are spread quickly. Everything is frozen, dehydrated and then transported. The restaurant is the



How healthy is the good life?

last link. French fries are no longer cooked in beef. Instead, the flavour industry churns out complex chemicals for "strawberry" milkshakes and "smoky" chicken.

These products are marketed mainly to children. The fast food giants have infiltrated the school system. Ninety-six percent of American children recognize Ronald McDonald. Only Santa Claus rates higher.

The fast food industry grew through the franchise system, perfected by McDonald's. Instead of demanding large royalties or selling supplies, the McDonald's Corporation became the landlord for nearly all its American franchisees. These were leased to franchisees with at least a 40% mark up. Additional rental fees were based on a restaurant's annual revenue.

Disobeying the company amounted to violating the terms of the lease. A study found that within four or five years of opening 38.1% of businesses failed. The failure rate of new independent businesses was 6.2% lower. Once an agreement is signed the franchisee is on his own. Subway has been described as the biggest problem in franchising.

Ranchers who symbolised the American way of life with their blue jeans and cowboy hats are now an endangered species. Small farms are being sold off as real estate or being replaced by huge industrialized farms, since prices are driven down by suppliers of the fast food industry. Potato farmers have been reduced to becoming sharecroppers. The suicide rate among ranchers and farmers in the US is about three times higher than the national average.

This model is traveling round the world setting up shop. The consumer is king and can refuse to bite. The fast food industry will have to come up with better practices if it wants to survive.

Let the heart rule

ANIL WILSON

SEXUAL misdemeanors and political naiveté notwithstanding, Arnold Schwarzenegger has become the Governor of California. This is not the first time that one has witnessed an easy transition from reel-hero to real-hero. In our own context, from MGR to Vinod Khanna one can count numerous examples of such a movement from the world of bizarre make-believe to the world of harsh reality. The two worlds coalesce into one another almost effortlessly. The reason is not far to seek. Both share a common metaphysics: that of the duplicitous, the fraudulent and the absurd. It is a natural concomitant of life without values. In India the coalescing process is speeding towards completion. While the Indian Brain is today recognized as one of the best in the world, the same, alas, cannot be said of the Indian Heart. It almost appears as if one has progressed at the cost of the other.

The roots of this situation can be traced to the fact that somewhere along the line we gave up all efforts at educating the heart and have concentrated only on educating the head. The fanatical obsession with the earning power of learning that concomitantly postulates an irrelevance of all other pedagogical activity has created a situation where there is little or no interest in the moral dimensions of learning. Inevitably therefore, we are losing the most fundamental vocation of the human intellect, which is its humanizing potential and its capacity to address practical moral dimensions of day-to-day living. We have forgotten that the only true vocation of education – any kind of education – is to continually enhance, not the earning but the humanizing power of the human race. Thus our study of literature is important only if it sensitizes us to the importance of human feelings and emotions, our study of economics is significant only if it sensitizes us to the human condition in the context of the material aspects of life, our study of history is meaningful only if it sensitizes us to the forces that impel human life and bring happiness and misery in their wake, our study of the sciences is momentous only if it sensitizes us to the parameters of human existence and the infinite patterns and rhythms of life. However, today we study a subject not for its sensitizing potential but for its potential earning power. No wonder that a university education has become a commodity and not a life altering experience. No wonder that a college is seen as a transit camp to the work place instead of an incubator for the transformation of the individual. The effect of such an intellectualism alienated from fundamental human values is there for all to see: we have life without consciousness, sound without meaning; power without responsibility, opinion without rational process; we accept criminals, we admire dictators, we confuse teaching with learning, degrees with competence, and fluency with the ability to think afresh. The natural result is an intellectual and moral vacuum that is filled up by populist rhetoric on the one hand and coercion and corruption on the other.

Power brokers have always realized that in order to control people you first need to control the educational matrices that determine a people. Dilute education of values and you have control over people. This is because people with values cannot be ruled over except by the values they hold dear. Undermine their sense of integrity and you promote not merit but pull, not ability but 'networking'. Set up standards of achievement available to the most inept and you kill the impetus towards improvement, towards excellence, towards perfection. Tagore's dream for his country: "where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection" ("Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high") becomes a laughable fantasy of a romantically fevered mind. The fundamental value of 'rigour' that characterizes any worthwhile educational process is now under attack with examining Boards vying with each other in proclaiming how "student-friendly" (a euphemism for "how easy") their courses are. Such a denuding of values from education has produced the archetypal post-modern man: one who cheats and lies but preserves a respectable façade. He is aware that he is dishonest but this does not trouble him as long as he believes that others think he is honest and he derives his self-respect from this illusory perception.

Daniel Fusfeld, a well-known economist, tells the story of a monk from the Middle Ages who made a pilgrimage to Rome where he bought a silver chalice for the cathedral in his hometown. On his return trip to Germany he showed his acquisition to a couple of merchants. The merchants congratulated him on his purchase and applauded his sense of trade in paying far less than what the chalice was actually worth. The merchants were taken aback on finding that their observations had disturbed the monk so much that he went back to Rome to pay a more acceptable price to the salesman. While for the merchants the behaviour of the monk served to show the 'irrational' influence that a sense of values can have on economic dealings, for the monk price-consciousness meant paying the just price.

The point is that we have blurred the difference between value and price, between education and advocacy. We have forgotten that there is a basic difference between 'teaching

a subject' and 'educating an individual': and that the true vocation of education is the latter. To recognize this distinction is to recognize the fact that there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. All education—no matter what the subject, no matter what form of presentation—carries a predisposition, a specific inclination, a value. There is no such thing as an 'unbiased education'. Moreover, education in its true sense must have a subversive element. It must subvert popular perceptions, paternalistic prescriptive programmes, all principles or beliefs concerning human affairs that are autonomous of the human and the humane. Education can never be the handmaiden of society while advocacy invariably is.

Whatever be the wider ramifications of such a debate, (and there are many) the fact remains that we need to recognize that much of what goes under the garb of education is only advocacy. The present approach, where 'value education' is presented as a separate discipline, appears to suggest that while the general mass of education is 'value-free' or 'value-less' yet 'value' has a role to play that is an adjunct role in the form of a subsidiary to main line subjects. Moreover, the defenders of value-free education insist that in the kind of setting that we have today, we cannot stress the values and beliefs of some, while ignoring the values of others. And so, they say, we'll avoid all the problems inherent in this situation by simply agreeing to ignore all values. This specious argument which suggests that there can be no fixed points of reference have made our educational institutions become centers of intellectual disorder. This has resulted in a closing of the human heart.

The intellectual cacophony that surrounds us can only be resolved if we realize that an education that ignores moral and spiritual values cannot qualify as a quality education. We need to affirm the fact that just as there is an order in the realm of nature proposed by the laws of science, an order in the field of reason postulated by the laws of logic, so too is there a moral order – a moral order that is a transcendent, unchanging moral

order, independent of sectarian beliefs — and this moral order needs to be restored to its central place in the educational process. This task is possible only when we recognize that values, and not 'pure facts' however 'technically correct' they may be, are the foundation stones of any society. Modern education has largely separated virtue from knowledge and has thereby severed the link between the mind and the heart.

Any worthwhile education cannot afford to ignore either the mind or the heart. Together they form the vital links in the chain of civilization. Thus, education to be truly meaningful needs to move away from the conventional 'survival learning' and move towards 'generative learning'. This implies that the aim and purpose of any and all kinds of study is to get to the heart of what it means to be human. Through such a study, be it that of Physics or Economics, Engineering or Literature, the teacher and the student essentially recreate themselves, re-perceive the world and their relationship to it and thus become a part of the generative process of life. All that this requires is a realignment of our pedagogical priorities with the focus on the common human desire for a life elevated by dignity, decency and moral progress.

Anil Wilson is Principal, St Stephen's College, Delhi.



The fanatical obsession with the earning power of learning that concomitantly postulates an irrelevance of all other pedagogical activity has created a situation where there is little or no interest in the moral dimensions of learning.