

Civil Society

IT IS HELL FOR THOSE WHO BLOW THE WHISTLE

**Activists gather to discuss the right to information law
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DELHI'S STREET BANKERS

Homeless children set up a bank to save, lend and learn. Now, can their idea go global?

COVER STORY



SMART STREET BANK

Homeless working children in Delhi set up a bank at a night shelter. It funds small businesses, imparts life skills and has takers elsewhere in the world too

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Cover photograph: LAKSHMAN ANAND

Civil Society

Right to information is real reform

A true test of the ability of the Congress and its allies to govern with equity lies in the draft of a central law on the right to information cobbled together over the years by various voluntary groups. It was recently given some final polishing and adopted by Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council.

The draft has now gone to the government where bureaucrats and politicians seem to have found common cause in watering it down. The government already has a draft bill of its own of which it has given notice. But this bill is full of holes and in fact negates better laws already passed by nine states. The NAC draft plugs these holes and naturally it can be expected to have few takers among people in power.

The right to information campaign is targeted primarily at opening up government and making it accountable to common people. *Hamara paisa hamara hisab* (Show us how our money is being spent) is the slogan grassroot groups have used in their campaign as they help ordinary people extract from the government information on road contracts and ration shop deliveries. The state laws were passed because transparency in governance has become essential for getting various kinds of international funding. But the intention clearly was to keep the laws on paper. This is evident from the fact that citizens (poor or middle class) helped by activists face huge problems in getting the state governments to part with information. Senior officers make it clear that they are unhappy with such activism. "This is not the way to do things" is the common refrain.

And yet in the right to information lie the seeds of true reform and hope of equity and efficiency in governance. Activist groups have already shown across the country, beginning with Rajasthan and Delhi, how they can use the law to expose corruption and save huge sums of public money. The past five years witnessed much talk of reform in the economy. But this was a reform process hijacked by the corporate sector and presided over by the networked mandarins of CII and FICCI. Politicians fell over each other to attend industry meetings, but when it came to opening up government and making it more accountable to the common person, no leader had any time. In this the CPI(M) was no different from the BJP and the Congress. It is really quite funny to see the normally roaring leftists get all weak in the knees when they talk to industry. But reform has to include industry and go way beyond it. It must provide access to natural resources like forests and water, sponsor entrepreneurship, clean up the legal system, make available health facilities and education.

Reforms as we have known them have excluded the citizen and the consumer. All the common space available in society has been appropriated by industry which knows to work well with government and politicians. A vigorous right to information law at the Centre will be the first step in the process of removing this imbalance. At the very least it will be an expression of honest intent.

Two stories we have in this issue underline the importance of making industry accountable. The Centre for Science and Environment's Green Rating has helped the paper industry improve its production processes and thereby actually enhance its bottom line. The effort now is to get the government to own a coherent 20-year policy for the growth of this important industry. Greenpeace, on the other hand, has exposed the underbelly of the pharmaceutical companies in Andhra Pradesh. These companies are regarded as the gems of modern Indian industry, they are the darlings of the business press and the stock markets and just look at the environmental mess they are responsible for. Is CSE's approach of rating and dialogue the answer, or do these managements deserve sterner stuff from Greenpeace?. The jury is out.

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Life is hell for whistle-blowers

A convention puts pressure on govt for a national right to information law

Civil Society News
New Delhi

HE was a responsible senior police officer till he took on big fish in his fight against corruption in Maharashtra. Now he is a nobody. You can't take his name. You can't shoot his picture. You can't tell his story. He's been suspended, but service rules still apply to him and his case is in court. Such is the battering that he has already received that he wouldn't like to take any more chances.

SHE was a director of vigilance in a huge public sector organisation. She found evidence of corruption against the head of the organisation. The Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) said there was merit in her charges. But she was shunted out of her job, her pay cheque was stopped and she has been fighting cases against the government. The man she complained against got a fresh term in office. Once again, she is a whistle-blower who has been reduced to a nobody. You can't take her name. You can't shoot her picture. And of course you dare not tell her story.

Whistle-blowers like these came together for one of the workshops at the national convention on the right to information held for two days in Delhi in October. The convention attracted activists from across the country to share their experiences in implementing right to information laws in the states.

The convention also comes after the acceptance by Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council (NAC) of a draft national law on the right to information. The law has been put before the government but, as expected, has run into opposition from bureaucrats and politicians who fear transparency and accountability.

The whistle-blowers' workshop was one of many interesting workshops. It showed how difficult, and even dangerous, it is to get the government to open up.

The best known whistle-blower in recent times has been Satyendra Dubey, who perhaps paid with his life for exposing corruption in the national highways project. Even Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's office did not keep his name confidential.

When you become an officer in the Indian Police Service (IPS) you take a pledge to uphold the Constitution and preserve the image of the force at all times. But in reality there is no room for an officer who decides to expose wrongdoing in high places.

"We are untouchables," says the police officer from Maharashtra. "The celebrity officers won't even look at us when all that we have done is to uphold the pledge that we were asked to take when we joined the service."

"We need an environment in which a whistle-blower is appreciated," he says.



Drummers at the *jan sunwai* held in Delhi before the national convention

Photos: LAKSHMAN ANAND



Aruna Roy at the *jan sunwai*

"A whistle-blower takes a very difficult decision when he or she speaks up. On one side is the comfort of the system and all the advantages that go with it. On the other side is a path full of thorns. Society needs to reward whistle-blowers and make it easier for them to come forward."

A whistle-blower also faces pressure from his or her family. Suspension and humiliation bring tensions home. "Why didn't you think of us? Whom have you done this for?" are questions distraught loved ones ask.

Whistle-blowers play an invaluable role in exposing corruption. Invariably they have privileged information, which would be difficult to come by were it not for their courage and integrity. In government, exposing corruption is a part of the service rules. In the private sector, several companies consider it global good prac-

tice to have a policy for whistle-blowers.

A right to information law can provide very routine information about the working of a government department. However, it is only a whistle-blower who can expose corruption in high places because of the privileged access he or she may have.

Beyond a point no government department or officer will provide completely damning information about itself to the public. But a whistle-blower, the Maharashtra police

officer pointed out, can piece together information from various sources using different pretexts.

It is the people who can support whistle-blowers. And concerned citizens want to know what their government is doing with their money. "*Hamara paisa, hamara hisaab*," was the slogan that rent the air as Khayal singers from Rajasthan sang right to information songs.

Over 200 organisations from 20 states turned up at the Delhi University's Arts faculty, the venue of the convention, to affirm their support for a national right to information law.

They wanted corruption to be laid bare. Why should fellow Indians die of hunger though a public distribution system exists? Why aren't schools built in villages or roads repaired when public money had been spent? The answers are

there, hidden from the people by the government. It's the silence that needs to be broken. "The right to information is not just to know, but to act," said activist Aruna Roy.

"Information is most important for the poorest," said Susheela from Beawar in Rajasthan, where the first convention was held. When women from her village demanded to see how much money had actually been spent on a school and roads, locals derisively laughed at the "*ghaghra paltan*." "Information is for the educated, not for you," they were told. Wrong, she said. "The poor need it for survival. We need *soochna* about government programmes. It's the only way to unearth corruption in the panchayat or government."

Why is India hungry? asked Jean Dreze. To fight hunger we need the employment guarantee act, the PDS, the ICDS and pensions for the disabled, he said. These services don't reach the people because they are hijacked by the corrupt. Forty workshops were held on how to get information and broadcast it.

Activists were told to frame sharp questions, so that they didn't miss anything. "The onus is still on the citizen," remarked Dhunu Roy of Hazards Centre. The topics discussed included health, education, human rights, nuclear hazards, industrial pollution, social audits, evictions from forests and slums and role of the media.

The convention gave an idea of how impatient people are with the secretiveness of governments. They want accountability. And clearly the place to begin is with a strong law at the Centre.

Four things for the law to work...

Civil Society News
New Delhi

Shekhar Singh, Convenor of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) told *Civil Society* that there were certain issues in the draft right to information law on which campaigners would not budge. These are:

1 Blanket exclusions: Information with security agencies relating to viola-

tion of human rights, corruption or destruction of the environment must be released. A blanket exclusion on the plea that this information is not in the public interest is not acceptable.

2 Penalties: The draft law on the right to information places stringent penalties, as much as ten years of imprisonment, to an officer if he wilfully provides wrong information. While the number of years of imprisonment can be nego-

tiated, there is no stepping back from strict penalties.

3 Appeal mechanism: The draft law states that an independent appellate authority will be set up.

While an information officer of the government department concerned can judge the information to be provided in the first instance, if it is refused the person can appeal to the appellate authority which should function like a High Court.

Otherwise departments can refuse to give information on flimsy grounds.

4 Accessible Act: The Act should be easily accessible to all. Its procedures should not be cumbersome, time-consuming or expensive. People in rural areas should be able to hand in requests for information to the SDM and he should be responsible for seeing that it goes to the right department. Charges for providing the information should be minimal.

In Delhi, Left all for EGA

Civil Society News
New Delhi

At a gathering of organisations and individuals in New Delhi to discuss "Early and Effective Implementation of an Employment Guarantee Act," Left leaders Sitaram Yechury (Member, Politburo) and D Raja, CPI made their first public statements on the EGA.

"The EGA is an important part of the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) which we broadly endorsed. It is simply non-negotiable," asserted Yechury.

Echoing his views, D Raja said they had insisted on an EGA and had even suggested in writing that employment guarantee should be for 180 days rather than 100 days as set out in the CMP. Both the Left leaders rooted strongly for an extension of the EGA to urban areas. In its present form, the EGA draft is applicable in rural areas and talks of a guarantee of 100 days of employment to anyone willing to do casual manual work at the statutory minimum wage within 15 days of application.

Proclaiming himself as a supporter of privatisation, globalisation and employment guarantee, senior Congressman and National Advisory Council member Jairam Ramesh said his party had first spoken of a national rural EGA in 2002, but in its form today, it was not just one party's idea.

He announced that the EGA draft will be presented in Parliament in December and will be implemented from April 2005 in 150 most backward districts, in the states of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka to begin with.

On the question of financing the EGA, which is expected to cost at least around Rs 30000 crore annually, Jairam Ramesh said: "the government has to decide its priorities — if the 6th Pay Commission does come about, this will be a problem."

However, Sitaram Yechury argued that the two were not necessarily incompatible and there could be other avenues of raising resources such as recovering huge amounts in tax evasion. "The question is not of money but political will," said Raja.

'We are ready for the worst'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

Activist **Nikhil De** of the MKSS spoke to *Civil Society* about why so many people gathered in the red brick compound of Delhi University's Arts Faculty to show solidarity for the people's right to information and the need for strong central legislation.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Nikhil De of MKSS

Why this convention? Do you sense opposition to the proposed new law?

The convention has two purposes. It's not just aimed at a right to information law. Certainly, the timing sends a message to the government that so many people from different corners of the country are completely in support of strong legislation.

We anticipate there will be opposition. So far all the statements from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) are that the NAC recommendations are being worked on.

But our discussions with the Ministry of Training and Personnel, for instance, shows there doesn't seem to be much thinking vis-a-vis the old law and the amendments. Either decisions have not yet filtered down or there is going to be a lot of bureaucratic opposition. We have to be prepared for the worst, while hoping for the best.

So we have to make sure that everyone is here. The purpose of this convention is to activate the right to information, begin-

ning with the idea that right to information is our birthright whether or not there is a law. If you get that idea into your society and culture then you get that sense of purpose that this is yours.

The law is one factor and how people will use it is the other. It is important, especially for campaigners, to understand the information component, ask sharp questions, demand answers and use those answers.

That's what's bringing the issue alive.

You managed to get wide consensus on this law among diverse groups.

What is unique about this law is that it has a snowball effect. The more you use it the more it strengthens the law itself because it points out its own deficiencies.

The right to information law cuts across all barriers. The strength of the Indian right to information movement is that it continues to be dominated and shaped by organisations of the poor and the disadvantaged. It is India's contribution to the right to information movement in the world. Other countries are looking at it. It's reached a stage where there is no taking it back.

There is no leadership in this particular movement. We are continuously learning from each other, which is one of the strengths of this movement.

Why are there no politicians present here? Politicians would have come, I believe, but

the convention was fixed about three months ago and the Maharashtra elections were announced subsequently. It was too late to change the dates. Most politicians are sitting in Maharashtra.

I don't think left politicians are sitting in Maharashtra.

No, no most of them are... we'll have another meeting post Maharashtra elections to get support for the law, let's see then. The convention itself is very political — in a sense the issue is political. Where I would agree with you is that the leadership for a movement like this should come from political parties. But that's the failure of our established political party system. The better people in political parties are saying, please raise it, we'll support.

Won't some political parties oppose the right to information law?

There are miles to go. These are very early days in the campaign even though it's having a massive effect — small efforts are producing huge turbulence.

The government will have to streamline its systems?

This is a chicken and egg situation. The bureaucracy opposes the things which will allow the law to be effective. But we are all getting smarter also...making our alliances, getting to know where the problems are....

How has the corporate sector reacted?

It's a very interesting phase. People are asking questions — whether its an agitation against a Coca-Cola factory to see how much groundwater is being withdrawn or pollution related problems or labour. Will people directly fight the companies? Will the government be on the side of the corporations or of the people?

The right to information allows you the right to own the government...it's our government, our questions, our money. The law does allow people to pull the government away from strong vested interests. According to the recommendations, sent through the NAC, it is the government's duty to collect comprehensive information from the corporate sector. People can ask any information which the government should ordinarily collect from anyone who is affecting public interest.

Rating makes industry greener

Paper manufacturers improve. Now for a 20-year road map

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Centre for Science and Environment's second green rating of paper manufacturers has shown that they have significantly improved their environmental performance even though they remain far behind world standards.

CSE now believes that the paper industry can make many further gains if the government gives the industry the importance that it deserves and puts in place a 20-year policy which will encourage investments in technology and, through organised farm forestry, stimulate wood markets and provide a boost to rural incomes.

The second green rating is to be followed by a meeting of CEOs and then there will be confabulations with the government. CSE has succeeded in creating common space in which dialogue is possible. The rating process takes industry completely into confidence. It similarly seeks from industry easy accessibility and disclosure. Since the first rating of the paper industry, CSE has successfully rated the automobile and chlor-alkali sectors as well.

But things were quite different six years ago when CSE set out to rate the paper industry for the first time. The NGO wanted manufacturers to open up their factories and provide detailed information on their production processes so that there could be a public rating of their environmental performance.

The response then to CSE was hostile. The paper industry is known to be extremely polluting and the last thing managements wanted was a nosy NGO getting into their plants. But when CSE persisted and made it known that it would publicly embarrass companies which did not provide information, the hostility began to wane. Industry realised it would be cheaper to cooperate and perhaps there would even be mileage in being seen as wanting to reform and clean up.

And so the first green rating of an industry in India came to be conducted. CSE used a novel multi-tiered system involving neighbourhood inspectors at the grassroots, inspectors and a well-qualified technical committee right at the top. The assessment was done on various counts: the sourcing of wood, emissions, effluents, energy-efficiency, consumption of water.

The rating showed that Indian paper manufacturers lagged way behind world standards. They needed to make huge investments in their plants to upgrade their processes. They also needed to shift from a dependence on wood provided at cheap rates by the government to wood grown by farmers so as to help build markets in wood and stimulate rural prosperity.

Over the years CSE has worked closely with the paper industry and many of the improvements it reports through the second green rating have come voluntarily with manufacturers realising that there are gains to bottom line and image from being environmentally responsible.

A sticking point remains industry's demand for captive plantations to meet its increasing wood requirements because of the growing demand for paper. CSE insists that industry can meet its requirements from farmers through extension agreements. Captive plantations, says CSE, will create a glut of wood and push farmers out of the market.

Industry, however, insists that wood from farmers is unreliable. Contiguous tracts are not available and investments made with farmers run the risk of being hijacked by competitors or other industries in search of wood.

Industry, therefore, wants political assurances and durable policy. It is to this end that CSE has decided to take its green rating efforts further by convincing the government to encourage sustainable endeavours by indus-



Chandra Bhushan, who heads CSE's Green Rating Project

The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has succeeded in creating common space in which dialogue is possible. The rating process takes industry completely into confidence. It similarly seeks from industry easy accessibility and disclosure. Since the first rating of the paper industry, which was marked by suspicion, CSE has successfully rated the automobile and chlor-alkali sectors as well.

try. Success with paper could be the model for other sectors in need of urgent reform.

CSE's late founder, Anil Agarwal, read about a green rating initiative in the US while he was being treated for cancer. He decided to replicate it here in India. CSE's green rating team is headed by Chandra Bhushan, the man Agarwal picked for the job.

Bhushan is a civil engineer by training, but much more than that he is also a progressive man of science. He is ardent campaigner for cleaner industry, but he brings to the table pragmatism and reasonableness, which put managements at ease.

Chandra Bhushan spoke to *Civil Society* on the second green rating of the paper industry.

What does the latest rating of the paper industry show?
The industry has a long way to go to meet global standards. But there is a definite improvement. It shows democracy is working since the improvement has been achieved in the absence of consistent government policy and only through the pressure of civil society.

What are the key improvements?

Water consumption has gone down by 40% when compared to 1991. More wood is being sourced from farmers, which means the pressure on natural forests is coming down. Environmental management systems are in place. Previously only JK had ISO 14001, now 13 companies have the certificate and more companies are on their way to getting it. What is needed now is better implementation, which will happen because of regulation and social pressures.

But none of the companies is really affected by the social pressures. It is more your perception than reality.

There is an informal take-off of the message and companies have come to realise that an environmental problem is as much a liability as a financial problem. After our findings, companies, which did not get good ratings, did suffer on the stock market.

It can't be. Your green ratings are hardly reported. Who knows about them?

Some newspapers do and there is our website, other websites which pick up the findings.

But for a stock to feel the impact, a sufficiently large number of investors have to be convinced enough to dump it.

This only proves my point. There are fund manager and big investors who do keep track of our green rating and there will be more who do so in years to come as is the case in developed markets where a company's environmental performance is very important.

Information, once put in the public domain, does move around in a variety of ways. At the most basic level, investors would want to stay away from a company which pollutes because it endangers public health and may be shut down.

How has your methodology evolved?

In our first rating we put emphasis on management systems. This time around we found that management systems were in place so we gave more weight to performance. BILT, for instance, is a well-managed company and so it has good reporting systems. In the first rating its Ballarpur unit was rated third. This time it has gone down to 13 on the basis of ground performance. This does not mean that Ballarpur has not improved, it has, but others have improved more.

ITC has done spectacularly well.

The key to its high score is ITC's investment in technology. They have got out of chlorine and are the only ones to do so. This means they are in a position to handle water consumption and pollution much better. Of course the big reason for this is that they are into food grade packaging material. Their customers won't accept chlorine. So you see economic pressure, customer pressure does work.

'The target will be big firms. A 1000 Bhopals are happening'



G Ananthapadmanabhan, head of Greenpeace India

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

The 1988 class of Electrical Engineering at IIT Chennai had a graduate by the name of G Ananthapadmanabhan. His distinction: he got the lowest paying job of all students in his batch. He took up a job as a teacher at 'The School', a JD Krishnamurthy Foundation school in Chennai and taught there for 11 years. Then, after a two-and-a-half-year spell in the corporate sector, he has taken up an assignment to head Greenpeace in India. He spoke to *Civil Society*:

Why did you move to Greenpeace?

A friend asked me if I would consider it. I have always admired this organisation. They way they fund themselves - no corporate, no government, no bilateral or multilateral funding here. Ninety-five percent of the money comes from individuals donating less than 50 dollars. We already have 20,000 subscribers in India. The second reason I look up to them is confrontation. When all the letters have been written and all the reports have been filed, if nothing happens most NGOs do not take confrontative action. But Greenpeace takes on environmental crimes. The challenge of setting up Greenpeace India stimulated me intellectually. I felt about it passionately.

What does Greenpeace do in India?

We have four campaigns. Our biggest is against toxic chemicals. The second is against organisations that are freely introducing genetically modified organisms into agriculture. We have evidence to say that is a categorical no-no. The third area is to say that renewable energy is the way of the future to prevent unfavourable climate change. The fourth is to protect marine eco-systems. Greenpeace has a strong connection with the ocean.

What are you doing in the toxic waste campaign?

We are focusing on industrial estates. We will target big companies and get them to change their ways. We feel thousands of Bhopals are happening in slow motion in this country. The slack processes that led up to Bhopal, the cutting of corners, rules being flouted, dangerous chemicals being manufactured in outdated factories is happening across the country. Hundreds and thousands of people are being affected. We have to transform these industrial estates.

What have you done so far?

Asia's only remaining DDT factory is in Eloor in Cochin. They have a special licence to manufacture that, to control malaria. It is supposed to be phased out by 2007. Hindustan Pesticide, a public sector company was manufacturing DDT with complete disregard to the environment. This was one of our targets. We analysed the chemicals in the environment and the health impact on the population and confronted them. In the middle of this year, there was a huge fire in their premises and the Supreme Court committee on hazardous waste passed an order asking them to close.

What is your modus operandi?

We first do a credible analysis of the situation. Then we pressurise decision-makers. We take direct confrontative actions. Kerala does not have an environment minister. The Pollution Control Board (PCB) comes under the health minister. We told him about Eloor and there was no action. So one morning six activists gave him a wake up call and asked him. He did not come out and they did not move. They got arrested.



Greenpeace puts up a board at Aurobindo Pharma's plant at Pattancheru

You are also campaigning in Pattancheru, the famed pharmaceutical cluster near Hyderabad...

Yes. The central pollution control board has put out a list of 22 most polluted industrial estates in the country. Eloor and Pattancheru top that list. If you visit Pattancheru you do not need any sophisticated analysis. Any honest person would know that it is not acceptable. The Indian pharma industry does not have any competitive advantage.

What do you mean - the pharma industry does not have a competitive advantage?

It is an industry that is a hot favourite of the Indian business press. Another example is ship-breaking. If you visit Alang, more than half the world's end-of-life ships end up there. About 10 to 15 per cent of India's steel comes from these ships. According to the business magazines this is a huge competitive advantage. This is a huge environmental risk. They contaminate ground water for miles around. This is not competitive advantage but a right to pollute, right to put people at risk, right to ignore the environment. The entire chemical

industry in India has no competitive advantage, the cheaper cost of manufacturing comes from complete disregard to the laws of the land.

Why is it cheaper to break ships here? They break ships covered with asbestos with bare hands. They use cheap labour from Orissa whom they pay a pittance. They use oxyacetylene torches that burst if there are any combustible gases. About 300 people die every year. Many more people are maimed. This cannot go on.

Aren't there financial liabilities if public companies are involved?

Many of them are darlings of the business press and the India stock exchanges. HLL, that paragon of virtue in the Indian corporate sector, was recently fined Rs 50 crores by the Supreme Court hazardous waste committee. They had no business selling broken thermometers, which everyone knows has mercury, to *kabadiwalas*. This is not rocket science. They would not have dared do it anywhere else in the world. Most industries violate Indian law.

How are you implementing the Right to Information law in Pattancheru?

I am not an expert but companies and markets are out of the RTI law. But the Supreme Court committee on hazardous waste passed a ruling last year that all companies should display in a board outside what raw materials they use and in what quantities they are handling them. We launched a campaign in Pattancheru. Aurobindo Pharma was our first target. Thirty or forty companies have complied after that.

We did two things. We put up a form on a board and put it outside Aurobindo Pharma and we said "Now fill this". We took 60 college students from Hyderabad and asked them to inspect the surroundings of all factories. Most of the 60 plants in the area did not correspond to the Supreme Court orders.

You are not going to start picketing companies?

No. We believe in non-violence and truth. We obey laws. If you are asking me whether we would close companies, the answer is yes. We got the Bayer office in Mumbai closed because they were experimenting with the CRY 97 gene in cauliflower and cabbage and that is a known allergen. We got to know that the Department of Biotechnology had permitted Bayer to do this. We wrote them a lot of letters and there was no response. This gene is banned in the US. They evaded us saying they never experimented.

If there are going to liabilities on business should the stock market not take more notice of this?

We went to three AGMs (annual general body meetings) of HLL and alerted shareholders of the potential liabilities because of Kodaikanal. The company repeatedly assured the shareholders that there were no financial liabilities. Now they have been slapped with a fine. So stock markets, financial analysts and newspapers should start taking these risks seriously.

'Tribals can lead a green revolution'

If water is enhanced in tribal regions, they won't be poor

Eklavya Prasad
Chosala

IN 1974 when Harnath Jagawat started the Navinchandra Mafatlal Sadguru Water and Development Foundation (NMSWDF) at Dahod in Gujarat, he worked as chief executive, typist, clerk, driver and peon. His team of four shared a single desk to ensure their sparse annual budget of Rs 35,000 was well spent. Exactly 30 years later, NMSWDF has a full-fledged office at Chosala village and has expanded operations into Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

NMSWDF's biggest achievement is to have provided India with a model for tribal development based on water management. When Jagawat and his team began working with impoverished tribals in the Panchmahal hills, they found lack of irrigation to be the main reason for mass migration. Through sensible natural resource management, NMSWDF resuscitated the flow of water. Today, areas in which they work have food and water security. Tribals are making money from horticulture, milk production, vegetable cultivation and agro-forestry.

The Rajasthan government has nominated Jagawat to an expert committee set up to formulate the state's water policy. The Planning Commission has invited him to be part of a consultative group on water resources for the mid-term review of the tenth Five Year Plan. He has recently been appointed to CAPART's national standing committee on watershed and water resources. In an interview to Eklavya Prasad, Jagawat explained the NMSWDF model and said it should be replicated across India's tribal belt.

What is NMSWDF's contribution to tribal development?

For nearly three decades we have been advocating the water potential of India's tribal belt. This region of 1,500 km stretches from Gujarat across central India right up to Western Orissa and the Jharkhand plateau. Over 70 per cent of India's tribal population lives here. The tribal belt does not offer scope for big irrigation or intensive groundwater development but has high drainage density and virtually limitless scope for small-scale water and land resource development of the type we have been promoting. However, this opportunity remains unutilised.

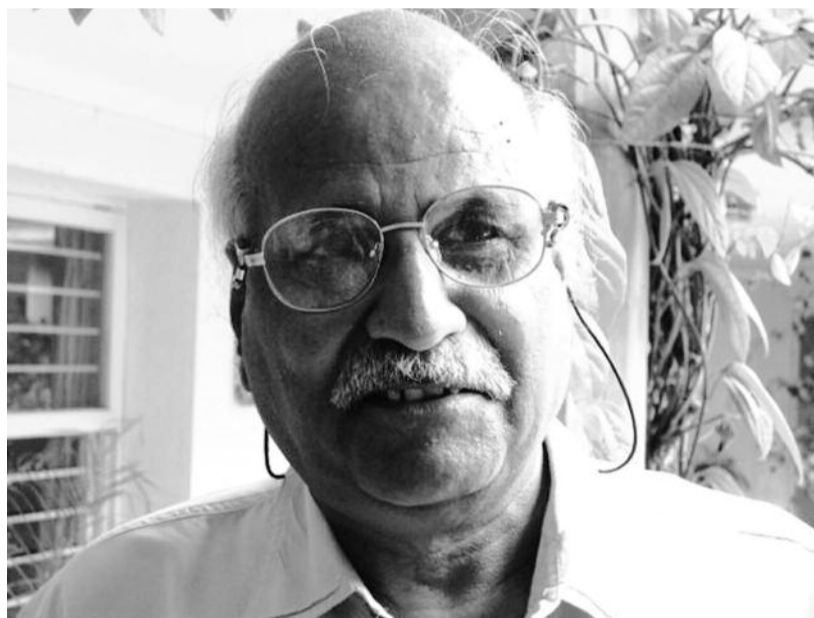
We therefore took it upon ourselves to enhance the overall status of tribals in our areas. Our focus is to reduce poverty by making good use of natural resources and technology. From the start, we wanted to bring tribal communities above subsistence level so that they could cope with drought and other natural calamities, have food security and be gainfully employed. Our integrated model has been tested and replicated in villages of Gujarat and Rajasthan and I am confident it can be used in different tribal regions for a secure future.

Could you explain the NMSWDF model?

In a tribal region, community and natural resources control the existence of local inhabitants. Both are interdependent and essential for a secured existence. To strengthen the link between community and natural resources, water has been made the core premise of the model because it is the most crucial component for agricultural development, food security and to reduce distress migration. Most tribal areas receive adequate rain-

fall, which if harvested, stored and utilised judiciously can increase land productivity.

To strengthen social, economic and governance systems, our model looks at five components - village institutions, water resources, agriculture, wasteland, forests and off-farm options. We build the capacity of stakeholders and strengthen village level institutions so that they can manage their resources effectively. Water management consists of lift irrigation, water-harvesting structures especially masonry check dams and watershed development focusing on soil and water conservation. Plantations on private and community land and afforestation including farm forestry, community forestry and Joint Forest Management (JFM) are carried out. The model creates opportunities for villagers to take



Harnath Jagawat

Mota Dharola in Dahod has a tribal population of about 50 per cent. Agricultural income has increased from Rs 1.2 million to over Rs 10 million a year. The village is producing milk worth about Rs 3 million annually because green fodder is available. Tribal farmers are earning between Rs 25,000 to Rs 45,000 every year from milk production.

up horticulture, floriculture and vegetable cultivation and enhance household incomes. The emphasis is on judicious use of natural resources through irrigation technologies like drip irrigation.

What has been the impact of this model?

In several tribal villages, on account of agro-forestry, large numbers of tribal families own trees worth more than one or two lakhs of rupees each, which is a handsome amount.

In fact, several tribal farmers sold trees worth these amounts particularly during drought years. More than 350 tribal villages have no drinking water problem despite successive drought. Interestingly, federations of tribal lift irrigation cooperatives are specialising in drip irrigation systems, wastelands development, drinking water supply, etc.

Village transformation has been extremely fascinating. For instance, at Vankol village in Dahod district we start-

ed with a lift irrigation scheme in 1995 and ended with a watershed programme in 2001. Agricultural production increased from 86 metric tonnes to 621 metric tonnes. Crop yields of maize, paddy, wheat, gram, groundnut and pulses have gone up.

Prior to our work the village had only three wells containing water for eight months. By 2000-01, Vankol had 17 wells with water for 12 months, despite a bad drought. Even after three consecutive drought years, wells located downstream from the local check dam yielded sufficient water to meet drinking water needs.

Horticulture has transformed common and barren wastelands to productive use. Villagers planted saplings of nilgiri, neem, teak, mango, amla, and lemon. Their purpose was to provide green cover and ensure fuel, fodder and timber. We were able to address distress migration. A significant population in the village has become self-employed, which has drastically cut the migration rate from 83 per cent to 10 per cent.

Mota Dharola in Dahod has a tribal population of about 50 per cent. Agricultural income has increased from Rs 1.2 million to over Rs 10 million a year. The village is producing milk worth about Rs 3 million annually because green fodder is available. Tribal farmers are earning between Rs 25,000 to Rs 45,000 every year from milk production.

During the rabi season of 2003-04, 26 farmers grew ginger on 13 acres and earned Rs 2.3 million. A tribal village called Rozam has 250 horticulture and floriculture plots. Families that cultivated roses are earning around Rs. 150 to Rs 300 every day for about eight months in a year. Those who have grown marigolds get Rs 150 every day. Tribal women and their associations are managing horticulture and floriculture programmes benefiting 12,000 tribal households. All this was made possible because of irrigation.

Can all tribal areas benefit from this model?

Our tribal regions are the poorest. Paradoxically, these areas have immense potential for development through natural resource management.

The tribal population has increased from 67 million in 1991 to 83 million in 2001. An incremental change in the economic profile of this community will substantially impact the Gross Domestic Product.

Scientists claim that any region that receives more than 500 mm annual rainfall need not be poor. The rainfall in all our tribal regions is much higher. Rain drainage systems such as rivers and rivulets are more than enough to meet the water requirements of local people.

In Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, it is possible to construct about 45,000 masonry water harvesting structures on small and large water sources. The integration of big and small water harvesting structures could be an excellent combination. Large systems can occasionally release water for the smaller systems and thereby the entire river could have water round the year. This has been demonstrated at some places and can be replicated.

The average actual irrigation in our tribal districts is five per cent or less. It should be possible to achieve around 30 per cent irrigation. When irrigation is combined with plantation and horticulture, results are amazing.

If an effort like ours is replicated a second green revolution, led by tribals, is in the offing.

Special jobs for special kids

Vidya Viswanathan
Bangalore

TEN students who graduated in computer training from the Vishwas Air Force Special School campus at Hebbal in Bangalore have got jobs to do backend work for Tata Teleservices. They will enter customer data and get paid about Rs 1500 a month. "That's a big jump for their families which have an income of just Rs 3000," says Sugandha Sukratraj, director, Special Olympics, India. Sugandha has also negotiated life insurance of Rs 60,000 and medical insurance of Rs 30,000 for these special young people.

They have been given a chance to lead a dignified life because of collaboration between Special Olympics, a non-profit, Intel, a large corporate and the Indian Air Force.

"The disabilities in many children could have been completely avoided. It is because of poor prenatal and postnatal care or perhaps malnutrition. Down's Syndrome is another cause. Karnataka alone has 212 special schools, struggling for funds. Most youngsters who come to our training center have IQs of less than 40. But many can learn repetitive tasks and do them well," says Sugandha.

Sugandha's meeting with Intel came about because of an international alliance between Special Olympics in Washington and Intel. "We were approached to help out. So we rolled out a programme where we trained the Special Olympics Staff in India on how to use software, created a database for them and gave them 35 laptops," says Sindhu Caveriappa, manager for community relations at Intel in Bangalore. After that Sindhu and Sugandha struck up a relationship. "Instead of doing many small projects we decided to identify one special interest community and make a larger impact," says Sindhu.

Intel has equipped the Special Olympics lab at Vishwas and got its partner, Educomp to design a special curriculum for a three-month computer-training course. Two instructors, Padmini and Meera, have been trained

as well. At the end of the course, students get a certificate from Intel during a ceremony. "Just this felicitation makes so much difference to the attitude of parents towards these children," says Sugandha. She points out that one child was the reason for a marriage breaking up.

The students greet visitors and introduce themselves. They sing songs. Most of them travel to school by bus on



On the job after training

their own. "We are opening a training center in the Special School in Chennai. The headmistress, Mrinalini, had never touched a computer. Sunil, who has Down's Syndrome, taught her to close a computer. Sandeep C, who has accident-related problems, explained how to open the computer and use a mouse. On the second day we could not get the headmistress off the computer," says Sugandha.

Yet when the youngsters began, Sugandha and her two trainers had to start from scratch. They took the students to the Jain hospital and got their eyes tested. They had to teach them how to travel to school by bus, alone.

"We told the parents to get in through the front door

and get the child in from the back". For one month, after the first batch of ten students started using the bus, Sugandha would wait for a phone call to say they had reached. The trainers had to make sure that these students did not wander off onto the road. They introduced the security guard to each child and taught them all how to cross the road in front of the school. They had to toilet train the children because they had never seen a western toilet. Every child needed one instructor. So they encouraged parents to work with another child and not their own.

There were many setbacks. Fifteen days into the programme, Padmini, who is trained to work with spastic children, discovered that three students did not know the alphabets. They were typing the keys because their parents were pointing at the keyboard. So the trainers put aside the computers and started teaching the alphabets. They played word games and got the students to learn A to Z in a week. After five months these students can key in forms.

They key in fewer forms per hour than a normal person. But their accuracy is far higher. Tata Teleservices has agreed to set up a centre on the Air Force school premises.

"It took us six months to convince them," says Vinod Thimayya of Third Wave Telecommunications, a marketing company that works for Tata Teleservices. Thimayya met

Sugandha through a mutual friend and told her that training would not get the youngsters anywhere if they did not network with the corporate sector to get them employment. He works with the National Association for the Blind (NAB) and has trained 10 blind students to make outbound telesales calls.

The good news is this is not a one-off project. A second centre has started in Mandya, and a third one is coming up in Chennai. Talks are on with HCL to get sponsorship for two more in Delhi and Chandigarh. "The Air Force has special schools all over the country. These are safe and beautiful environments. We could run training classes all over," says Sugandha.

Getting democracy to the grassroots

Civil Society News
New Delhi

WITH a sympathetic government in power and restrictions on foreign funding removed the time seems right for NGOs to steam ahead. But while NGOs have many worthy development models, they have not managed to spread these over larger regions to eliminate poverty.

At a workshop organised by the National Foundation for India (NFI) at the Habitat Centre, Ajay Mehta, Executive Director, NFI suggested a "rights-based" approach and democratic decentralisation to bring about faster change. Deepening democracy at the grassroots was seen as critical.

The workshop discussed four research papers commissioned by ICCO, a Dutch funding agency. The objective was to "identify the nature of challenges confronting poverty alleviation". The regions chosen were Deccan Plateau, Chhatta Nagpur, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and the north-east.

Familiar issues cropped up: the pathetic state of health and education services, inapt natural resource management and lack of women's rights. A few of the findings included high rural to urban migration in Chhatta Nagpur, unsuited agriculture and female foeticide in the Deccan Plateau, social alienation in the north-east and a rise in landlessness and poverty in Assam coupled with the emergence of a feudal land owning class.

"It is a service delivery failure," said Rita Sarin of the Hunger Project. It was felt that people would have to innovate their own service delivery models and NGOs could help them do it.

One problem was leadership, often missing among people in grassroots institutions. Secondly, NGOs don't always have an accurate assessment of demands from the rural sector. For instance in education, the demand is for English and not "child centric" education. In health people opt for "quick fix" solutions so that they can get back to work.

Government policies also hindered NGO efforts. In agriculture, infrastructure strategies focussed on increasing food production and not food security. As for livelihood, the government had a "hands-off" approach to forests, a source of income for poorer people.

Yet the state was capable of astonishing successes done large-scale, said Pratap Bhanu Mehta, director of the Centre for Policy Studies. Elections, for instance, or even the gigantic Kumbh mela, though these were "episodic".

Abhijeet Sen, member of the Planning Commission, suggested that NGOs should access funds directly from Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) for setting up services. Money from donors could go directly to the state, without funders insisting on particular programmes. NGOs could bid for projects.

Rita Sarin said that donors did bring in progressive ideas. Besides, PRIs were often manned by conservative people, who might oppose an NGO's liberal agenda.

A bank by homeless children gives them loans, teaches life skills and has takers elsewhere in the world too

SMART STREET BANK



Civil Society News
New Delhi

WEAVE your way through cars, buses, trucks, *thelas* and rickshaws. Walk past a sea of people near the Old Delhi railway station. Turn right, down a long and narrow *galli* littered with homeless men hanging around stoned. Don't stop to stare because at the end of this lane you will find a room bursting with positive energy.

It is a shelter for street children and a base for New Delhi's youngest entrepreneurs.

Four boys recently received money from the Children's Development Bank to start new enterprises or diversify existing ones. As they discuss their business plans with friends, the nitty-gritty of every enterprise is laid threadbare.

Young Mohit, a rag-picker, wants to become a *namkeen*-seller. He's taken a loan of Rs 200. Mohammed Akbar, another rag-picker, received Rs 500 to brew tea and sell it. Samre took Rs 3000 so that he could hawk toys. And Sandeep is using his credit of Rs 2000 to sell plastic flowers that light up with a battery.

The Children's Development Bank was started in September 2001, as a savings and credit scheme, in New Delhi by Butterflies, an NGO that works with street children. In three years the bank's model has gone to other countries. After

expanding to Chennai, Kolkata, Muzaffarpur and now Leh, the bank has travelled to Afghanistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Talks are on with NGOs in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The bank is doing especially well in Kabul, guided by NGO Aschiana, and is expected to open a branch in Mazar-e-Sharif. Requests are flowing in from Sudan and Egypt.

Rita Panicker, director of Butterflies, hopes the Children's Development Bank will become a global entity like the Asian Development Bank. "If they can lend money for development projects why can't we lend internationally to children?" she says.

The banks are especially unique because they are owned and managed by street and working children. They decide its rules and regulations. The adults lend a helping hand. Children can save money and withdraw it when they like. Bank managers are adolescents chosen by the children.

Panicker says the bank was started to help street and working children get life skills, like learning to save and use money sensibly for education, training or to start businesses. She says banking develops a child's personality and teaches accounting and management. "It also gives them a sense of security."

"We don't believe children should work," clarifies Suman Sachdeva, project director with Butterflies, "but given existing realities we decided to start the bank." Butterflies first tries to persuade runaway children to return. Most don't want to and choose a life of battered freedom, living off the city's mean streets.



Photos: LAKSHMAN ANAND

A crowd at the bank at 6 pm

RAG-PICKERS FIRST: Runaway street kids start their careers as rag pickers and desperately want to work their way up. "See, there's no *izzat* in doing rag-picking," says Mohit with a shrug. "It's messy. But for most of us it's the first job we do. No investment is required. At the end of the day you deposit your collection with the Seth and he calculates your *hisaab*. You can earn Rs 30 to Rs 40."

With his loan, Mohit figures he could increase his earnings to Rs 50 per day. There are shops nearby in Delhi's famed Chandni Chowk market where wholesalers sell dried, salted moong dal. Mohit will carry it in a clean plastic bucket with some paper packets. A bit of onion, a twist of lime and a ditty praising his dal will bring in customers in need of a snack.

The biggest hurdle to his business growth path is the policeman. Every child has to pay the local cop, sometimes as much as one-third his earnings. Mohit's pals advise him to hang out at the bus stand and not the railway station. He agrees. "The railway station is teeming with policemen. Forget about bribes, I could land up in jail forever," Mohit says with a slight shiver of his thin shoulders. "At the same time there are more passengers on trains," he adds realistically.

Mohit has decided to wait for Delhi's winter chill. So has Akbar. He bought a kettle, a kerosene stove, tea leaves and plastic glasses for his tea-selling enterprise. He went around the markets with his kettle, but he found hardly any takers. After two days Akbar finally gave up and put his stuff away. "I tried selling each cup for Rs 2 without much success. The tea went cold. Finally I brought my kettle back to the shelter. I warmed up the tea and I shared it with my friends. Once winter comes, people will buy my tea more readily," he says with hope written all over his small face.

His pals say first of all he needs to make his tea tastier. But more importantly he should consider setting up shop on the pavement. The tea will stay hot simmering on the stove and customers will come to him. Besides by roaming around the tea will spill. Akbar conjures up the fearful image of the local cop.

Muhammad Kalam, the shelter's gentle 21-year old caretaker agrees winter is a good time to begin business but also advises caution. "How about selling peanuts?" he suggests, but Akbar says he's invested in tea and he's got to make that work. Meanwhile, to earn money he's gone back to rag-picking.

Samre switched from selling pirated CDs and cassettes of Bollywood movies to plastic toys. One cassette would cost only Rs 3 and sell for Rs 20. He used to earn nearly Rs 80 every day but the police took about Rs 30. "I ran the risk of going to jail if I didn't pay the cops. It used to worry me no end." He started the new business two months ago. His toys are selling and he has already repaid Rs 300 of his loan.

The second hurdle is pickpockets. Street kids could do with an ATM machine. Sandeep got his pocket picked and lost Rs 300. His plastic flowers, Rs 6 apiece, are doing fine, but could do better. He buys them from a wholesaler in Sadar Bazaar, in the Walled City, who doesn't let him check them out and he's saddled with the duds.

"I've got to get another wholesaler and do something about

keeping my money safe." He says cheap radios which cost as little as Rs 18 to Rs 50 are a good add on. He's planning to take a second loan and diversify.

To earn more, Sandeep and Samre are selling at night, going from bus to bus. They could even spread out their wares on the pavement at that hour. There's not much choice. Street and working children have to be mobile vendors. Each and every inch of New Delhi's broken crumbling pavements in the Walled City are valued real estate rented out by the cops. Although the Delhi government has plans to regularise street vending, child hawkers are excluded.

Butterflies wants to encourage adolescents to start group enterprises and has identified the catering business, computer-related enterprises and horticulture as viable. A newspaper is published by them and they hope to train kids to become publishers.

The NGO is looking for mentors and coaches for adolescents. "While the mentor would be a role model, the coach should be

somebody who is willing to share skills with the child more often," says Suman Sachdeva.

MY MONEY, MY BANK:

The banks in India retain their present name—the Bal Vikas Bank. Each starts with a seed capital of Rs 2 lakhs provided by Comic Relief an international funding agency. The money is routed through a British organisation called CIVA. (Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action). The first Delhi bank got money from Ford Foundation through the National Foundation for India. Street kids in the capital have already saved Rs 40,000.

Delhi has one branch at the shelter in Fatehpuri near the Old Delhi railway station and the other in Okhla, an industrial hub in south Delhi.

The Fatehpuri branch, located inside the shelter, is the main bank. Eighty children between nine to 18 years of age are its clients. At 6 pm, bank manager Suraj, just 16, slips inside the teller's cubicle as children line up to deposit money or withdraw cash, at the end of a working day. Rs 3 is the minimum amount accepted.

"It's not very easy being a manager, though I do enjoy it," says Suraj. "You need patience. Initially we had lots of fights. The

children kept getting confused about how much they had deposited or withdrawn. My calculator collapsed showing them."

Bank members then decided to bifurcate the deposits into two *khata*s—the *jamma khata* also called the *chalta phirta khata* (current account) and the *bachat khata* (savings account). They also elect a management committee, a loan committee and the bank's two managers, Suraj and Raju: one looks after the *jamma khata* and the other takes care of the *bachat khata*.

A general body meeting takes place once a month and any member can express his opinion freely.

Bank promoters inform other street kids about the bank, collect money at designated contact points—Delhi has 12—and submit applications for membership or loans. Development promoters are the senior-most. They are between 16 and 18 years old, well versed in banking and are sent to different cities to train other children.

Delhi has four bank managers, eight bank promoters and two



Every child has a passbook and an account number

Samre switched from selling pirated CDs and cassettes of Bollywood movies to plastic toys. One cassette would cost only Rs 3 and sell for Rs 20. He used to earn nearly Rs 80 every day but the police took about Rs 30. "I ran the risk of going to jail if I didn't pay the cops. It used to worry me no end." He started the new business two months ago. His toys are selling and he has already repaid Rs 300 of his loan of Rs 3000.



Suraj
BANK MANAGER



Sandeep
SELLS FLOWERS



Muhammad Akbar—
SELLS TEA



Samre
SELLS TOYS

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Suresh Sharma's mission is to rescue snakes from people. Here you see him introducing his snakes to

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'The bank is a reality and gives children security'

Rita Panicker, director of Butterflies, is uncomfortable in a swivel chair in her small office at Green Park Extension in Delhi. She'd rather walk the streets of the city, she says, making friends with children. A social worker from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Rita became interested in street and working children while commuting by Mumbai's trains. Her first project was a credit and savings scheme for adolescents who'd spent years in juvenile institutions. But that didn't fructify because Rita moved to Delhi and her links with Mumbai snapped. "I never forgave myself," she says.

The success of the Children's Development Bank has made up for the past.

"The bank is not a gimmick. It's happening, it's working," she says with controlled excitement.

Panicker told *Civil Society* that she hopes the bank will spread globally and rival established lending institutions.

The bank caught the imagination of the children. Some of them do not take part in any other programme but they bank with us.

How did the Children's Development Bank evolve?

The decision to start the Bal Vikas Bank was taken in April 2001 but it really began in September that year.

When we got funding from CIVA they had suggested a Youth Bank. We discussed it in the Bal Sabha. The kids said, look, we are not youth, we are children. The Youth Bank gave grants to young people if they wanted to work for the community or do some business enterprise. The kids said all the money will vanish.

They said we want a children's bank and we'll run it with our own concepts and rules.

The bank caught the imagination of the children. Some of them do not take part in any other programme but they bank with us.

How did it spread?

News spread through the media. We thought let's run the bank for a couple of years and see what happens. We can learn lessons and then we'll expand, after two years. NGOs began to write to us saying they would like to start a bank for children too.

The banks in other countries of South Asia started in August this year. All of them are doing well. In Kabul we have two. They have nearly 200 members already. There are a lot of working children in Afghanistan. Our partners will take it to Mazhar-i-Sharif soon.

Since they started recently they are saving and not giving any loans. The kids decided they would first save and build their capital. Although they have the seed money they want to see how the children will use the bank before giving out loans. The philosophy and methodology are the same in all countries.

Although money is sent directly to them by our funders, meetings are held in India and the children come here for training. It's very difficult to get things printed in Afghanistan so we gave them piles of ledgers and pass books. You know they had to carry all that back with them.

Are you planning to link the banks?

Sure. Next year we are going off to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. We are also getting requests from Sudan, Iran and Central Asia. By 2006-2007 we should be able to move into those countries. We'd like to see how it works in South Asia first.

We are looking at an International Children's Development Bank which will be located in Delhi and would have banks in Latin America, Africa and Central Asia,

and that there would be a federation of all these banks. If you can have an Asian Development Bank giving money to nation states to do things, why shouldn't children have their own banks for their development?

How does it empower the children?

It empowers children in democratic functioning. The bank is not just a place to take loans. It makes you responsible. If you are the manager and everybody's saving with you, you have to be responsible for that. You can't behave in an autocratic manner. You have to be polite, answer all their questions and be patient. You need to be a good counsellor in getting kids to become members.



Rita Panicker at her office in New Delhi

Saving is a life skill. Children who are managers are learning management, accounting and book-keeping. Loan committee members are learning how to assess a loan application. What do you do with a bad loan?

What about small enterprises?

We make kids over 15, who want to run enterprises, assess the business venture they want to start. Do they have any skills, are they passionate about it? If there's a group of kids who want to take a loan we have a workshop with them.

By the end of the workshop most often they change their plans. We have been suggesting businesses which can be run cooperatively and which would bring higher returns than what they could get individually.

Doesn't all this take away from their formal education?

It is mandatory for adolescent boys who take loans to continue their schooling. They are part of NIOS, but they can continue their business as well.

What is the most important aspect of the bank?

It gives the children a feeling of security. They know this is one place they can get credit for education or starting a business. They feel this bank is theirs and they will not be asked ten thousand questions because they are poor, and illiterate.

Next year we are going off to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. We are also getting requests from Sudan, Iran and Central Asia. By 2006-2007 we should be able to move into those countries. We'd like to see how it works in South Asia first.

development promoters.

To open an account the child fills up an application form with help from the street educator or bank promoter. The child is given an account number and a passbook. The minimum opening balance is Rs 20.

The bank is open every day from 6 pm to 8 pm. Children decide its timings according to what suits them. If a child deposits money every day for eleven months he earns a bonus. For loans, 20% of the savings amount is sanctioned. The applicant has to furnish two guarantors.

HSBC and Andhra Bank sent volunteers to train the children in assessing loan applications, identifying businesses, recovering loans and understanding banking terminology and principles. Several rounds of training were required with street educator Sunil and caretaker Muhammad Kalam constantly helping out.

"It worked both ways," says Panicker. "The HSBC volunteers adapted quickly. For a commercial bank profits are important but not for the children.

For instance volunteers said a guarantor should have a certain percentage of the loan amount in the bank. The children disagreed. Why penalise the guarantor, they said. He should have only 5% of the loan amount in his savings."

Street educator Sunil helps each child draw up a business plan. Then the application is forwarded to the loan committee. The applicant has to be ready to field questions. If he wants to start a business he is asked about his skills, his budget, where he will run it and so on. The loan committee asks the applicant how he would like to pay back. Would a year be comfortable? Once the committee okays his proposal, the money is credited to his account.

Certain rules are sacrosanct. Pickpockets and drug addicts cannot become members. Money will not be sanctioned for starting a cigarette or pan shop. A child can't take an advance on behalf of his family. "Sometimes estranged parents of the child turn up and ask for his money. We can tell them it's not permitted. The money is only for the child," say bank managers Suraj and Raju. Children are not permitted to drop out of school after taking a loan.

So far no child has absconded. "Actually it's quite the opposite," says Mohammed Kalam. "They open an account, deposit their money. Then they decide to go work somewhere else and leave their money behind." If the child returns and asks for his cash, it is promptly given.



"I used to sleep in the park. During the monsoon months, I had no shelter from the rain. Butterflies invited me in and I have never looked back since."



Mohammad Kalam

Although about 100 boys sleep in the shelter at night, very few stay on permanently. Street kids are a floating population in the city.

There's no way of tracking footloose children. Akbar's home is six railway stations away from Samastipur in Bihar, he says. His father is a rickshaw-puller. Akbar travelled to Kolkata, to meet his granny, then to Mumbai where the police beat him up, and finally to Delhi. Vijay has come from Nepal. "What else can a lost, harried child do," says Kalam.

"They get killed hanging out of trains. I tell them please be careful and educate yourself." **HOME IS SHELTER:** The shelter, run by Butterflies, is a real money saver. The boys used to spend around Rs 10 to Rs 20 every day on food, bought off the streets. At the shelter they get clean subsidised food: Rs 3 for lunch and Rs 2.50 for dinner. A second expense was movies. But the shelter has a large colour TV with a DVD player. Each boy is a member of the Bal Sabha and a decision was made collectively to buy a TV.

"Every working child has a small surplus," says Sunil, street educator. "They used to waste it on gambling and drugs. Thankfully that's all over now. The bank has given them the habit of saving. We'd like to encourage them to invest their money on further education."

The shelter is a large shed, fitted with fans and room coolers. A school functions

morning and evening and helps street kids appear for the National Institute of Open Schools (NIOS) exam. Some attend local government schools and work part time. There are computer classes, dance classes and theatre classes. The boys have identified a terrace atop a crowded MCD parking lot as a playground. A boisterous game of cricket goes on while bored drivers stationed below wonder where the noise is coming from.

Ambitions for the long term are changing. Theatre, banking, social service and teaching are professions the boys are talking about.

Kalam maintains discreet discipline, switching off the TV when it's time to study. He understands the children's fierce sense of freedom but also the value of education. He was a rag-picker when Butterflies opened their first shelter at Jama Masjid. "I used to sleep in the park," he recalls, "During the monsoon months, I had no shelter from the rain. Butterflies invited me in and I have never looked back since." After 12 years, he went back home to Muzaffarpur, persuaded by Butterflies. His family was delighted. They had given him up for dead.

'The idea is to empower children'

LAKSHMAN ANAND



The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) has helped the Children's Development Bank with simple advice. HSBC employees have done some handholding with regard to banking practices. "A bank for street children is a very powerful idea," Nancy Dickinson, HSBC's Regional Head for Northern Indian, told Civil Society in an interview at her new brightly lit office in Gurgaon

What is HSBC's involvement in the Children's Development Bank?

I was interested more in the process of empowerment and learning that it provided to children rather than the bank as a bank. I wanted four or five staff members who were committed to the idea to put together a simple training programme which talks about banking as a

business process --- not in a patronising way but by sharing information.

The kids were showing me all their little ledger books. They explained this is how we maintain our records and individual accounts, making sure everything is accounted. They were all so neatly written, done with pride. I thought we could help them set up systems using software on a PC and show them how we could put this in a meaningful alternative computer-based system, in case anything happens to paper records.

The bank model has spread nationally and globally. Is it possible to link these to form an international alternative banking network?

I don't have the answers. I have heard at their board meeting the challenges surrounding regulations. We don't want to get bogged down with regulation though obviously we have to be on the right side of these. We have to hear from Butterflies what their ideas on this are and to what extent we can help whether it is continuing with the educational support or linking up the banks. But before expanding too quickly it's better to understand all the issues and work them out. That's the cautious banker in me talking.

Do you think the idea is too ambitious or too complicated?

In the concept of pooling savings, the first thing is how do you keep the money safe for these children? Banking is secondary. It's a mechanism to empower the children. The bank is interesting as a concept of encouraging savings, education, empowerment without getting over-powered by the adults. Children are helping themselves. I think trust is important for the children. Butterflies has built trust with the children. Making decisions, how to examine loans, how to benefit business, the responsibility of paying back... these are very adult decisions.

Has the experience changed perceptions about children's banking?

I think it reiterates to me that from small acorns big trees grow. The enthusiasm, energy and creative ideas enthuse me, coming as they do from children with a very difficult life. There's a lot of power out there and it can be harnessed.

For a bank operating in an Indian city where 30% of the population is very poor and a large informal sector operates, does a project like this in any way fit into the business ideas of a bank like yours say as an entry into micro-credit?

I think yes, although here we are working more with micro-savings than micro-credit. The children's bank is now part of the whole region, how do we work with them? The vision, organisational skills, enthusiasm and commitment are there. The sky is the limit.



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Villagers outsmart contractors, fix their own road

Rakesh Agarwal
Sargipalli

THIS was a different road. Although kutcha or untarred, it was built by villagers to connect three faraway villages-Sargipalli, Bhaludhungri and Bhakikhmain in the Bargarh district of drought stricken western Orissa. During the 2003 monsoon a big part of the road got washed away. After that the villagers wanted to repair the road themselves and earn the money that the government would normally pay to contractors. Local officials, however, had other plans.

In December 2003, the Block Development Officer (BDO) sanctioned Rs. 1.42 lakh to repair the road. Immediately, two contractors from the Dahita gram panchayat, which oversees the three villages, bid for the contracts. Sensing trouble, the BDO diverted the money to some other village.

At once, the people called a meeting to decide what should be done. They act as a united force, fighting corruption and drawing up village development plans without any external help. In 2001, Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (GSA), a programme that makes people active subjects rather than passive recipients in development was launched here. GSA is a combined effort of People's Science Institute (PSI), Dehra Dun and Sahabagi Vikas Abhiyan (SVA), a consortium of voluntary organisations in western Orissa.

"We decided to approach the highest official in the district, before thinking of direct action," says Sagar Maher, a key figure who organised the meet.

The district collector once again sanctioned the money and said a local self-help group (SHG) would be awarded the contract. But the contractors were cunning and one was close to a political leader. They formed a SHG called the Dahita SHG and won the contract.

The villagers met again and decided to intervene. "It was our road and we have ten active SHGs in our village so if the contract has to go to an SHG, why not one of ours?" asked 38-year old Subrat Mahato of Sargipalli. The villagers got ready to fight tooth and nail. If the contract were not given to them, they would build the road by shramdaan, anyway.

This time, the villagers not only wrote to the BDO and district magistrate, they went to meet them in large numbers. Just then the Orissa Assembly elections were announced and the code of conduct was in force. The people had no option but to wait. And they waited till June 2004, when the elections were over.

Once again the villagers went to the BDO but he tried to get the work done through the department. "This was also a trick since in reality the gram-sewak would be doing the work and he was actually the contractor's man," informs 24-year old Prema Bohidhar of Bhaludhungri. Sensing this, the villagers opposed the move.

Pragati Vadi, a prominent local Oriya newspaper highlighted their work and then Vijay Ranjan Singh, member, Orissa Legislative Assembly, visited the village, praised their efforts and asked the BDO not to favour the Dahita SHG.

The BDO reverted to his old order and awarded the work to the Dahita SHG. They started repair work on the first bridge on the road.

The people of all three villages gathered to protest. "It was our right to work and we will not let people belonging to the greedy contractor usurp our legitimate right," said an angry Biman Misra of Bhakikhama village. The protests continued for two days. People lay on the road, making it impossible for the usurpers to work. They had to leave the site. But they threatened the villagers with dire consequences.

The villagers met in July to take a final decision on what they should do. "We decided to complete the work ourselves and do it immediately," says 23-year old Saraswati



Villagers of Bargarh district mending their road

Panda of Bhaludhungri. Next day, as dawn broke, about 600 people gathered at the site and began work. Seeing such a huge crowd the contractors couldn't do anything. They warned the villagers that since they belonged to a powerful group, their efforts would be wasted and they won't get paid for the job.

Undeterred, the people continued and the entire work was done in three days flat. Next the battle to get their rightful dues began.

The people got unexpected support. First, Pragati Vadi, a prominent local Oriya newspaper highlighted their work and then Vijay Ranjan Singh, member, Orissa Legislative Assembly, visited the village, praised their efforts and asked the BDO not to favour the Dahita SHG.

The people decided they must get paid. "It was our rightful share. We decided to get the money. We could use it for other development works in the villages," says Padma Bodhiraj. People approached the district magistrate in vain. He told them since the work had not been allotted to them in their name and they don't have any bills, they won't get any payment.

The villagers listened calmly and then retorted that if the payment were made to the Dahita SHG on the basis of some false bills, there would be a big revolt.

Support from political quarters gathered momentum. In September, the state's minister for agriculture, Surendra Nayak, visited Bargarh district.

After he heard about the incident, he ordered the district collector and the BDO to cancel the old contract and in future to get this kind of work done only through the village SHGs.

The BDO immediately cancelled the old order. He got the people's work assessed. It was valued at Rs. 38,000 and awarded to the Vindhyaivasini SHG in Sargipalli. The people generously gave Rs. 5,000 to the Dahita SHG to keep good relations. They now have Rs. 33,000 in their kitty plus a work order of Rs. 1.04 lakh in the name of their SHG.

Jasideeh's ancient black pottery is dying

Ashok Singh
Jasideeh

JASIDEEH, a place in Devghar Nagari, often called the cultural capital of Jharkhand, is the center of trade in terra cotta. Traditional artisans fashion a range of clay pots. Among these, is the gay-mouthed flask. The artisans call it an indigenous refrigerator and claim its water is cooler and tastier than any bottled water sold by multinationals. There are engraved flagons, attractive flowerpots, plant pots, cashboxes, filters and earthen lamp stands, all made by hand with traditional artistry.

But the terra cotta craft is slowly dying

because the artisans do not get remunerative prices for their beautiful wares, says Naresh Pandit, whose family has been breathing life into clay for generations. Plastic products are becoming more and more popular supplanting artistic clay pottery, he says. People in neighboring areas do not buy their products. There are a handful of connoisseurs who are willing to pay them good prices.

They have to bargain hard to get miserable prices. "It is embarrassing and against the natural inclination of an artist," says Pandit. Only during the Shravani fair, they are able to sell some of their products.

Yet these artisans have won awards at several national and international exhibitions. In fact in terra cotta, the black

pottery of Jasideeh is second only to Faizabad and is in demand with local and foreign tourists. Their bright surahis have bagged awards. In 1989, Naresh Pandit got the State Award for Excellent Craft by the Industry Department of the Bihar Government. Shree Lal Pandit, was given a silver medal for excellent craft in 1979, by the Bihar Government.

Even after the formation of a new state and repeated statements from the government, no one has truly tried to address the plight of the terracotta craftsmen. Commercially it is a significant craft and can find a big market abroad. (Charkha Development Communication Network)

Civil Society

PERSPECTIVES

Have an idea? Perhaps a lost cause? Tell your story or just express an honest opinion in these pages.

Can a law give freedom from hatred?

RAM GIDOOMAL



Through NR Eyes

Following their faith and would 'sideline' extremists who claim to speak for them. While the media focus is on Islamist radicals, Blunkett has stressed that the law 'will apply equally to far-right Christian evangelicals' and other faiths where words can lead to acts of violence.

Trevor Phillips, Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, has expressed support for the proposals, agreeing that there were many who did not have the full protection of anti-discrimination laws. "This is about protecting the believer, not the belief," he said. "It's about saying you hate someone because of their beliefs and you want everyone else to do something about it. That's incitement and we see this kind of harassment week in and week out."

Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Great Britain, one of the principal supporters of the new proposals, described them as "a long overdue measure and a welcome first step. One of the most important freedoms for all of us must be freedom from hate. The sooner the government introduces comprehensive legislation prohibiting religious discrimination as it has done with racial discrimination, the sooner a fairer deal for all UK citizens can be reached."

The Hindu Forum of Great Britain was, however, sceptical, urging caution to ensure these new laws protect all faith communities and arguing that because such legislation would be complex, a correct balance had to be struck between protection and an individual's right to freedom of expression.

Recently, a proposed rally of Al-Muhajiroun, a group that openly calls for attacks on people of other religions, was called off after combined pressure from Hindu and Sikh groups.

Other organisations, including the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), were more outright in their criticism. Spokesperson Massoud Shadrejah expressed fears over how the laws could be used against minority groups. Rather than enjoying additional protection from the law, religious minorities could find themselves the targets of prosecutions under the proposed legislation, the IHRC argued.

Dr. Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the Muslim Parliament, said: "We are not looking forward to legislation which will change nothing, except that the first victim will be a Muslim. We want to see that when police officers knock at our door we are treated as

OPINIONS are strongly divided on proposals for legislation in the UK against religious hatred. David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, announced on July 7 that the government is planning to introduce a new law banning Incitement to Religious Hatred 'as soon as possible'.

Reasons included growing racism on the grounds of religion and the expression of extremist beliefs post 9/11. The Home Office says that the proposed measures would cover a 'gap' in Britain's existing laws where people who make inflammatory remarks against Jews and Sikhs — groups with both religious and ethnic identities — can be prosecuted. However, as Christians, Muslims, Hindus and other religions do not constitute ethnic groups, anyone making comments that would inflame hatred against them are exempt from prosecution.

The Home Secretary argued that his proposals would protect ordinary people who want to get on with following their faith and would 'sideline' extremists who claim to speak for them.



human beings and in all other circumstances as fellow beings."

The chief executive of the Secular Society, Keith Porteous Wood, said that the new laws would be "yet another blow to freedom of expression."

"It is important to keep freedom of expression as unrestricted as possible, because not doing so would fuel religious extremism by effectively muzzling criticism of it," he added. "Also, and this may be counter-intuitive, by getting extremist views from whatever side of the argument out into the open, it will actually be more helpful than trying to block it and push it underground."

Labour peer Lord Desai believes there is no need for the proposed measures: "We will get into a real muddle if we take religion as a ground for prosecution, rather than ethnic stereotyping. When people insult Muslims they are not attacking the religion, they are attacking Muslims as a racial group. The protection required is already covered in law."

A BBC undercover reporter in fact exposed the deep religious hatred within the far right British National Party (BNP), which had attempted a re-branding exercise to expunge from the mind of most voters the awareness that it is, at heart, a Britain-for-the-whites party, seeking to 'encourage voluntary repatriation' of non-white immigrants. The BBC documentary *The Secret Agent* showed the party leader focussing his attacks on Islam, perhaps hoping to evade further prosecution (he already has a conviction for inciting racial hatred).

The question that all this raises for me is this: "Can passing a law really win hearts and minds to overcome prejudice and racism that fuel hatred and incite violence in society? How effective is legislation as a tool to bring about social change?"

Dowry has been outlawed in India for years, and yet the practice continues unabated — even more so in diaspora communities. Female infanticide continues in many societies in spite of the fact that there are laws against murder — specifically citing females.

The French government is determined to outlaw all religious symbols to maintain its tradition of strictly separating state and religion. The ban affects all religious groups and forbids religious items including Muslim headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crucifixes.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sent a special envoy to Paris to "...impress upon President Chirac the importance of the turban to the Sikh faith." But the appeal appears to have fallen

on deaf ears as France overturned the unequivocal views of the country's Sikh community and went ahead to impose the ban with immediate effect.

The irony of it all in a diaspora context is highlighted in a recent Home Office survey that showed that Britain's religious map is likely to change dramatically over the next decade, with the number of young Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus who stress the importance of their religion far outstripping the young Christians who profess a similar strength of faith! Laws that are being put forward to achieve level playing fields may actually have the unintended consequence of opposite effects in the longer term.

As a former member of the Cabinet Office Better Regulation Task Force, I believe that more legislation is not the answer. Surely what is needed is a delicate balance, in which legal intervention seems less likely to be helpful (though this government is generally very positive to faith communities and recognises their value). Voluntary codes of practice, effective whistle-blowing policies and citizenship classes for all are needed for everyone — not just newcomers and minority communities

Punish the guilty in Delhi

ARVIND KEJRIWAL



The Right To Know

THE Food Commissioner of Delhi refuses to take any action against the ration shop owners found guilty of siphoning rations meant for the poor. And he is stubborn, brash, and arrogant about it. But can the public do something about it?

The Public Distribution System (PDS) seems to exist only in files in large parts of Delhi. A survey of about 182 poor families in Welcome Colony in East Delhi revealed that 93% of wheat and 97% of rice meant for them had been siphoned off in a particular

month. Another survey of 46 families in R K Puram revealed that almost the entire rations meant for them are being misappropriated. The people of Ravidas Camp in Patparganj were told by the ration shop owner that the government had stopped sending rations. The people had not received any grains for the last several years. When the records of the shop owner, obtained under the Delhi Right to Information Act, were shown to them, they were shocked to see how rations meant for them were being diverted month after month.

The shop owners forge the signatures of the card-holders to divert their supplies. Almost every shop owner in Delhi is forging the signatures of almost every one of the card holders registered with him every month. Such is the quantum of evidence available if the government had the slightest desire to proceed against some of the shop owners and set an example. The state of records also indicates the active complicity of the food department officials. The stocks are not tallying and sales are shown to have been made to fictitious card-holders. Even routine inspections do not seem to be happening.

"Siphon off" or "misappropriation" are soft words to describe the state of affairs. It is daylight robbery. And that too of the most mean kind. The food meant for the poorest of the poor is being robbed by the shop owners in collusion with the Food Department officials.

And when the people obtain records under Right to

Information Act, verify it with the field situation and then make complaints to the Food Commissioner with incontrovertible evidence, the Food Commissioner has the cheek to refuse action on such complaints.

And it is not just the food officials who are partners with the shop owners in this crime. Every arm of the State including the police actively supports them. Several complaints of forgery, black marketing and theft have been made by individual beneficiaries and various NGOs to the police so far, but the police refuse to even register a case.

The shop owners turned violent in a number of places in Delhi when their records were obtained and the information contained in them was disseminated. In Kalyanpuri, the local Pradhan, who is alleged to have been "purchased" by the shop owners, drew out a dagger to stop volunteers from doing any survey in that area. The shop owners of Nandnagari physically assaulted Parivartan workers in the office premises of the Food Department. The shop owners of Welcome colony physically assaulted women volunteers and burnt all the records when volunteers were disseminating the information contained in records. The self-styled Pradhan of R K Puram threatened of dire consequences if the workers did not stop their activities.

The issue here is not just rations. Such a situation exists in almost every sphere of governance. The powerful from all sections of society have united to save their own interests through illegal means. The battle lines are clearly drawn. On one hand are the exploiters, the vested interests or the powerful mafia, which are symbolised by ration shop owners in this case. They have successfully co-opted every arm of the state in their business. They continue their nefarious activities with strong assurance and support from the law enforcement agencies. These agencies, which had been employed to check and prevent unlawful activities, not only turn a blind eye but also resist and obstruct any kind of investigations against their "partners". The refusal of the Food Commissioner to proceed against any shop owner points towards that.

On the other hand there are the exploited - the poor, illiterate and hapless population. What are the options before the public? How does one break this nexus and force the law keepers to do their job and punish the guilty? Isn't it possible to take action against the officials who refuse to act in accordance with law and who refuse

to punish law-breakers? Isn't it possible to punish such Food Commissioners, who defend the law-breakers so openly and blatantly?

Theoretically, it is. Section 217 of the Indian Penal Code says that if any officer of the government were to act against any person and if that officer does not do that in order to save that person, then that officer could be prosecuted and sentenced for a period not exceeding two years.

The first reading of this section raises so much hope. But there is a catch. Section 197 of Criminal Procedure Code says before starting to prosecute any officer, you have to obtain permission from the government. Do you think that the government (which means some brother officer of the guilty officer) will ever grant such permission if you ever approached the government? CBI has been either denied permission or the government just sat on their requests for long periods whenever such permissions were sought by them. Is it possible that such permissions would ever be granted to the common man?

I am told by a number of my lawyer friends, though I do not have any data to prove this, that Section 217 of IPC has been rarely used in the history of independent India, though there would have been several lakhs of instances which could be termed fit for its usage. The beauty of this piece of law is that it puts power in the hands of the people - to prosecute an officer who does not act in accordance with law.

So, should sec 197 of CrPC be removed and should it be made easy for a common man to prosecute any guilty officer? These laws were made during British times. The British Government did not want any of its officers to be tried by any native without the approval of the Queen.

There would still be merit in continuing with sec 197. Removal of this section would make government officials vulnerable to all sorts of cases and a government servant would have to spend most of his time defending himself in various courts of law.

However, there should be a fixed time limit within which the government should be required to either reject or permit prosecution of an officer. Inability of the government to take a decision within such time should be construed as an automatic permission. If the government rejects a request for such permission in any case, the people should have a right to appeal against such a rejection in a court of law.

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Educate the courts on rivers

RAJENDER SINGH



Paani

THE Supreme Court is the apex body of our polity. But the supreme responsibility of good governance is that of the government's. It is the people who invest the government with power and authority. In turn, the governance system must uphold the interests of the people.

In such a scenario, the Supreme Court becomes a revered institution. During the last several years, the intervention of the Supreme Court in the affairs of the government has increased. Recently, the court asked the government to submit its reply to the river-linking project. Ideally, the government should give a reply that upholds the peoples' interests. The Supreme Court and the people will listen to an honest answer sympathetically and accept it.

The union government has presented its viewpoint on the river-linking project to the Supreme Court. The government's reply reveals its dilemma. As soon as the government came to power, the prime minister and other important political leaders declared categorically that they would not implement the project. The process of disbanding the task force on river-linking was initiated. But now, officials of the task force have been asked to sit quietly. The government has declared to the apex court its intention of reviewing the project. This submission raises a myriad questions. Why is the government changing its earlier stance? What are its compulsions?

These questions made me restless. It was September 13 and I was in Auroville, Pondicherry, attending a workshop on water. International scientists, geologists and other experts were telling us about the crisis of underground water. I thought why are we inviting experts from Israel, France, Germany, Australia and America to educate us on ground water conservation? Can an outsider give us a magic formula for good groundwater management?

No one seemed aware of the nectar from the skies – raindrops that replenish groundwater and fill ponds to the brim. In the old days there were ponds even near the sea coast that caught the rain. Those have now been encroached upon. People have either built houses on those ponds or converted them into agricultural land. So, rain goes straight into the ocean. I do acknowledge the ocean has a right to rainwater. But right now the ocean is claiming all the water. Underground water is not getting replenished at all. Lack of drinking water then creates a clamour of distress. Scientists, like those at the workshop, step in and prescribe measures such as the river-linking project.

Concerned about the water crisis and anxious to fulfil the demands of society, our honourable Supreme Court consults these so-called experts and gives them and the big corporations a chance to push their own agenda. Under the guise of consultancy, they prescribe river-linking and the construction of big dams to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court instructs the government. Even the honourable President of India advocates the same prescription. India's folk water philosophy and how it quenched the thirst of the earth and of the people, is completely forgotten.

Has the consumption of water risen because of an increase in population, agriculture and industry? Or is the real reason for our water crisis due to our lifestyles and our new ways of conserving and managing water? The major reason has been water legislations that have ended the right of community ownership over water. These laws have made us forget all traditional methods of water use and water management. In its place mega water projects have been adopted and political tricksters have made tall and false promises of 'Water for All'. The community has forgotten its traditional responsibility of conserving water. Our political leaders can take the credit for that and for causing conflicts, disputes and divisions in society over water.

The orders of the Supreme Court have provided our political leaders with a good excuse to sanction mega water projects. When politicians of the present government

joined the electoral fray they kept telling us that the river linking project is unsound, it will just add to the coffers of big corporations and influential people. We are going to be a government of the poor peasants and workers, they said. We are therefore fully opposed to the project and we would never allow it to be implemented.

This was said to me by many prominent leaders of the government. But the reply submitted to the Supreme Court on river-linking goes against their loud proclamations. The government has not opposed the project in unambiguous, categorical terms. It has merely asked for a review.

Our government and leaders must apprise the Supreme Court, without mincing words, of the threats posed by the project. The honourable Court can issue orders to stop the implementation of the river-linking project, in national interest. The past record of the Supreme Court proves it has taken pro-people decisions whenever the true facts were presented. Hence, it is the utmost responsibility of the government to highlight all the disastrous effects of the project— environmental, economic, social and political. It must outline in detail, the natural, geographical and cultural hazards the project would unleash.



During the elections leaders who are now in government said that the river linking project is unsound, it will just add to the coffers of big corporations and influential people. Now they must say the same thing to the Supreme Court.

All of us have an equal share in natural water resources. These are being depleted by big corporations like Coca-Cola and Pepsi. The same corporations are advocating the river-linking project. The time is ripe for a government which has communist leaders and progressive elements to stall this anti-people project and prove they are committed to safeguarding the interests of the poor.

The government must articulate its stand candidly. Instead of a river-linking project, it ought to launch a 'community-river linking' project which will be pro-people, nature-friendly and decentralise water management. It would provide water to all and be an insurance against drought and floods. There are lots of inputs local experiments in water conservation and management could provide.

Since 1984, hundreds of villages in Alwar district, Rajasthan have become drought-proof and flood-proof since they managed their own water scientifically. During prolonged drought there was no scarcity. In 1996, when floods occurred elsewhere in the state, this area was not water logged. Ponds and earthen dams helped to soak up the water. The community's rules ensure thrifty use. There is a sense of well-being and prosperity. The river which was dry and parched is filled with water.

(Rajender Singh belongs to the Tarun Bharat Sangh and is convener of the Jal Biradari, India's largest network of water activists)

The prime minister and the minister for water resources must inform the Supreme Court about how the Sutlej-Yamuna link canal and the Cauvery dispute have disrupted and divided our society. They must state that the river-linking project will pitch state governments, villages and brothers against each other.

They should say these strife-ridden projects only swell the profits of big corporations and provide them a license to amass profits from the survey stage to implementation, consultancy and technology. The hard earned money of poor people is snatched subtly and distributed to political leaders, bureaucrats, businessmen and MNCs. The Supreme Court should be requested to put an end to this loot.

Our peasants and workers conserve water in their ponds and thereby meet their needs for agriculture and cattle-rearing. After the implementation of the river-linking project, the water authority that will be formed will not allow conservation of water even in ponds, just as our current legislation in irrigation obstructs conservation of water.

Barring the Brahmaputra we don't have surplus water in any of our rivers. And once rivers are linked, a war will erupt between people, forests and wild life. You can see a preview in the ongoing battle between Sawai Madhopur's Pachna Bagh and Bharatpur's Kewal Dev Ghana Bird sanctuary.

A water scarcity in Bharatapur will deprive Siberian birds of their natural habitat. Historically, through the year, small ponds provide water to birds, rivers and canals. Who is disrupting this traditional method? Since independence, who has been exploiting our underground water resources? Who is severely affected by their depletion? Who is reaping a rich harvest of profits from this situation?

FEEDBACK

Some distance to go in Manali

Himanshu Thakkar of South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers and People

WE are thankful to *Civil Society* for covering the campaign on the Allain Duhangan Hydroelectric Project (ADP) extensively in the July 2004 issue. We would like to clarify the following:

The subtitle "but NGOs find a solution in impartial public hearings" and the editorial give the mistaken impression that NGOs found a solution. In reality, a public hearing is required under the policies of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector arm of the World Bank, before they can take a project to the Board for a decision. Like other norms of the World Bank Group, this too was not being implemented. In fact, the Environment and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) of the ADP project on the IFC website in October 2003 claimed that necessary consultations had already been held and that the project was being presented to the Board for a decision on Oct 31, 2003.

This claim was patently false since no public consultation had been held. After the January 6 hearing, the people and SANDRP wrote to the Bank stating that an independent panel should be set up to make the public hearing meaningful. Company officials and the ERM consultants were sitting on the public hearing panel. This was absurd as both have vested interests in showing that the mandatory public hearing has taken place. After we insisted, the IFC agreed to the setting up of an independent panel.

We believe that public hearings have a very important role to play in democratic governance. We are admirers of the MKSS and Parivartan. However, in this case the hearing was held because it was necessary under IFC policies and because the affected people insisted on it. The people could only know about the project's impact from the ESIA document, which is why it was essential to translate it into Hindi.

The people of Jagatsukh then wrote a letter to the World Bank on May 21, 2004, where they listed 32 reasons why they found the current ESIA inadequate. The letter demanded that a fresh public hearing be held once the ESIA is completed and shared with the people in Hindi. Till then no decision should be taken about the project.

The issue is therefore far from being solved. People are still waiting for a response from the IFC. We were very disappointed that the independent panel did not talk about the fundamental inadequacy of the ESIA. It was even more frustrating to note that the independent panel had not even acknowledged the letter from the affected people. But that is another story.

It sounds so reasonable to hear the *Civil Society* editorial say, "no one is being displaced by the project, very little land is being acquired and hydel power is as clean as you can get." The subtitle on the cover says, "project, with 45 government clearances to its name." Lets get the facts straight. Most of the clearances are based on misleading, wrong or incomplete information. Some like the village No Objection Certificate (NOC) were proved to be wrong. It should be made clear that hydel power is far from being clean. It has huge social and environmental impacts and adds to global warming, sometimes even more than thermal projects.

It is surprising that you describe our objections as belated in the editorial. The project work is yet to start. It has not achieved financial closure. The local NOC has not been obtained. The impact assessment is fundamentally flawed and incomplete. Lastly the statement that "though the people of the villages presented a united front, they did not have anything to counter the company's ESIA" is not correct. As mentioned earlier, the letter from the villages contained no less than 32 reasons why the ESIA is inadequate.



Gujarat needs an Ambedkar movement

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

THE Gujarat carnage of 2002 showed that Dalits and OBCs are repeatedly used by the Sangh Parivar to kill Muslims. In several localities, especially in Ahmedabad, Muslims and Dalits live side by side and whenever communal violence breaks out they attack each other. However, it will be wrong to assume that all Dalits play the Sangh Parivar game.

Dalit and Muslim leaders talk of Dalit-Muslim unity to counter the Sangh Parivar. But ground realities are very different. In all major communal riots Dalits, especially the youth, participate in Hindu-Muslim riots on behalf of Hindus. In North India, the Valmikis are invariably used against Muslims. But in Maharashtra, the Mahars who follow Ambedkar's ideology, have resisted Shiv Sena attempts to co-opt them into assuming an anti-Muslim stance. They refused to participate in the Shiv Sena engineered Mumbai riots.

But Dalits from Tardeo in Gujarat and other areas attacked Muslims. This clearly shows that ideology can play a major role. In 1981, when anti-Dalit riots took place in Ahmedabad on the question of reservations, Walji Patel, a Dalit leader told us that Dalits will not kill Muslims at the behest of the Sangh Parivar because they have understood the Parivar's game-plan.

But during the communal riots of 1985 in Ahmedabad, Dalit youth were used by the Sangh Parivar to attack Muslims. When I questioned Waljibhai he expressed helplessness and said that Dalit youth do not listen to us. We can hardly influence them. During subsequent riots in Ahmedabad and the 2002 Gujarat carnage, Dalits again attacked Muslims. Many people told us during our investigation that Dalit youth were paid money and supplied liquor to carry out these murders.

It was because of this repeated and disturbing trend that Centre for Study of Society and Secularism decided to organise a Dalit-Muslim dialogue to understand why the Sangh Parivar succeeds in using the poorest of the poor to kill the poorest of the poor. It was heartening that many Dalit intellectuals and Muslims responded.

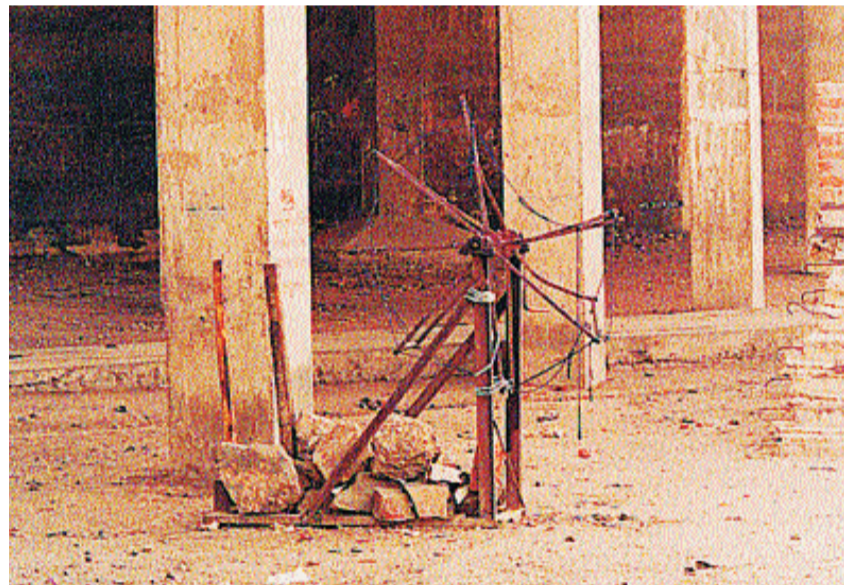
Chanderbhai Meheria, a Dalit writer, said the RSS and the BJP have created serious misunderstandings between the two communities. He felt Muslims are somewhat better off in economic and educational status and they should take initiatives to educate Dalits. Muslim communities in Gujarat like the Bohras, Khojas and Memons are well-off and run many educational institutions. They can reserve some seats for Dalits. It will have a positive effect on relations between the two communities. The Dalits are too poor to have such institutions.

The problem is that the Bohras, Khojas and Memons are inward looking and identity conscious. They do not even reserve seats for other

Muslims in their institutions, but such an initiative could really help.

PK Valera, a retired IAS officer, felt that Muslims, like upper-caste Hindus, have never accepted the Dalits. Muslims have ruled this country in the past and do not consider Dalits their equals. He suggested Muslims give Dalits job opportunities to win them over.

But Muslims are also divided into different biradaris, if not castes. Low caste poor Muslims are more egalitarian. However, the idea of Dalit-Muslim unity has gained acceptance and there is certainly no rejection of Dalits among upper-class Muslims. They would not treat Dalits as untouchables. Whatever limited economic data is available indicates that most Muslims are at par with Dalits. Not many Muslims can offer jobs or educational opportunities to Dalits.



SAHIR RAZA

Kannur Pillai, a retired police officer, pointed out that Muslims are also Dalits. They too are suppressed. A section of Dalits converted to Islam because they were harassed by upper-caste Hindus. The anti-Muslim propaganda among Dalits by the Sangh Parivar is to prevent Dalits from converting to Islam. The RSS is also creating hostility between Muslims and OBCs. In fact, OBCs and not Dalits carried out the attack on Gulbarga society, in which 40 Muslims along with Ehsan Jaffry were killed. It is true that OBC Hindus committed more atrocities against Muslims than Dalits.

Prakash Benkar, a Dalit advocate, said Muslims too attacked and burnt Dalit houses. Raju Solanki, a young Dalit activist and poet said in 20 mohallas where Dalits and Muslims lived together, no Dalits can be found today. They migrated since they felt insecure and feared attacks by Muslims. The Dalit leadership has failed to stop Dalit youth from joining the RSS and the VHP. It is Ambedkar's ideology alone that can forge unity between Dalits and Muslims, an essential step to stop communal violence.

My suggestion that a Dalit-Muslim Council should be formed in Gujarat, followed by such councils in every district was accepted. We have to stop Dalit youth from getting attracted to the RSS-VHP ideology. We should propagate Ambedkar's ideology to them. Gujarat needs an Ambedkar movement.

It is the only effective counter to RSS ideology.

Irrawaddy dolphins get tiger status

MEMBER countries of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) that met at Bangkok, voted to prohibit commercial trade of critically endangered Irrawaddy dolphins, concluding they are so rare that any trade for aquariums and dolphinaria is a threat to the species.

There is no recent global population estimate for Irrawaddy dolphins, but there has been a decline in numbers across their Asian range and they are likely to number fewer than 1,000. The CITES decision places Irrawaddy dolphins on Appendix I, where it joins species like great apes and tigers that are so endangered that no international commercial trade is allowed.

The main threat to Irrawaddy dolphins is drowning in fishing nets. The small dolphins live in shallow waters and suffer high death rates as bycatch in fishing nets. Irrawaddy dolphins in the Philippines, for example, are down to fewer than 70 individuals and will soon disappear if nothing is done to keep them from drowning in nets.

Irrawaddy dolphins are found in small, geographically isolated populations from Australia to India to the Philippines. Their ability to live in both salt water and fresh water makes them popular with dolphin shows, where fresh water tanks are cheaper to maintain. They are also easily trained and highly charismatic, making them popular attractions.

In Songkhla lake, in southern Thailand, there have been only six sightings of Irrawaddy dolphins since 2001. The Mekong River population in nearby Cambodia and Laos number fewer than 80 and are threatened by unregulated gold mining activities that leach cyanide and mercury into the river.

A retreat into inertia

IN the heart of Europe, 2004 is becoming an increasingly difficult year to hold on to one's sanity in the face of all that's taking place in the world. It seems as though political ideology has dissipated into vaporous banalities mouthed by politicians who can hardly arouse half the voting population to exercise their democratic rights.

With Orwellian ominous ness we have unknowingly slipped into a paradigm that has us cribbed and confined while we drive our latest model automobiles going nowhere, watching endless versions of voyeuristic "real TV" within confined spaces, eating excess amounts of reconstituted foods we buy from supermarkets where we spend endless hours, perplexed by countless choices of the same things.

Life is being lived superficially. Nothing profound is sought, or offered. We are forced to constantly prioritise what we may input. Survival, once a collective endeavour has reversed itself and has been fashioned into a selfish, individual process. Smug with the idea of democracy we have yielded the collective part of the social contract to our politicians, smug that our interests will be represented and taken care of. Even when we discover that they are not being represented and that they are actually being thwarted, we find ourselves in a state of drugged inertia, unwilling to rock the economic boat that allows us to escape the hardship that we know is the lot of the other three-quarters of the planet. Moral outrage is dead! Or is it?

After the publication of the Iraq Survey Group this week Jonathan Freedland writes in the Guardian:

"Cast your mind back to, say, January 2003 and imagine someone had told you this would be the outcome. You'd have assumed that London and Washington would now be on fire, as furious crowds filled the streets demanding the heads of leaders who had led them to war on such a manifestly false basis. Surely the garrison towns would be in revolt, as soldiers' wives and mothers, husbands and sons, bellowed their rage at the men who took their loved ones to fight a war against a danger that did not exist.

"That has not been the reaction. The ISG report has been received with a weary sigh: yeah, yeah, we knew that. To express shock and anger, to demand a reckoning, is to sound like a broken record."

In fact, the Labour Party Conference in Brighton this fall saw a

backstage deal struck between the four most powerful trade unions and the Labour Party. All this in the week following the leaked White Hall documents spelling out in utmost detail how Blair through his ambassador in Washington assured Bush of his 100% support for "pre-emptive" strikes and "regime change," and Kofi Annan's denouncement of the "illegal" war. Even the bogus WMD excuse was abandoned. Ironically, in Britain, unlike Aznar's Spain, the ruling Party is the common man's party.

The desperately optimistic are saying that for the long-term good of the UK and the world, both Blair and Bush should continue to rule so that we are driven to the ground sufficiently enough for us to shake off our ennui. The pessimists counter by asking whether we will be conclusively driven to the ground, too late to reverse the trend - sort of like global warming.

The rest of Europe is still battling the demons of the past while addressing the question of Turkey's entry into the European family. Even though we had

Romano Prodi announce the European Commission's decision to begin membership talks with Turkey this week, 56% of the French population are against the entry of this populous 71 million Muslim nation, run as a secular state. The traditional Fez has been banned for a few generations now and their language adopted the Roman script before the current adult generation was born. Likewise, in Germany (with 2.6 million Turks), Austria, The Netherlands and Belgium there is strong opposition to Turkey's entry, though feelings are sometimes divided even within the same political parties.

President Chirac along with his ex-foreign minister, Villepin are for Turkey's entry while his prime minister, Raffarin and finance minister, Sarkozy are against it along with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, ex-president of France and architect of the new European constitution. Several reasons are put forward, but Raffarin's statement: "Do we want the river of Islam to enter the riverbed of secularism?" talking about a country that has been secular longer than most of the other EU members, clearly indicates the true nature of their bias. With large Muslim populations allowed in as illegal immigrants to ease the labour needs of rich Europe, these countries are now faced with the anomaly of their domestic democracy and their neo-colonial attitudes towards developing nations, a perennial source of conflict.

LETTER FROM EUROPE



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Mental health perks up in Afghanistan

Mohammed Jawad Sharifzada
Kabul

THE nation's mental health appears to be improving two years after a survey suggested a large majority of Afghans suffer from psychological problems.

The study, conducted in 2002, but only published last month in the Journal of the American Medical Association, revealed that almost 68 per cent of the population was affected by depression, while 72 per cent showed symptoms of anxiety. The percentages were even higher among women and the disabled.

But now, two years since that study was conducted, there are signs that the nation's mental health is improving, according to two psychologists who work in Kabul.

Khitab Kaker, director of Afghanistan's only mental health hospital, said he believed that currently between 20 to 30 per cent of the population are mentally ill, including people that are clinically depressed, while between 40 to 50 per cent suffer from anxiety. He based his conclu-

sions on figures drawn from his own hospital in Kabul, as well as medical NGOs, health clinics and general hospitals throughout the country.

Dr Emal Aziz Jabbarkhail, who works in the psychiatric ward of Kabul's Ali Abad hospital, said the number of patients he treats for mental health problems has sharply declined over the past two years.

Jabbarkhail, who also lectures at the Kabul Medical University, credited the improved economic and political situation in the country for the apparent decline.

"In the past, people didn't have peace, and they were in a bad mental situation because of the fighting," explained Jabbarkhail.

Dr Mohammed Fahim Pazhman, a psychologist at the Army Medical Academy Hospital in Kabul, agreed.

"During the Taliban government, the economic situation of people was bad," he said. "People always felt that they were in jail, not in Afghanistan."

Dr Pazhman said under the Taliban, many young people suffered from anxiety because they feared they might be accosted by the

religious police who enforced the Taliban's strict dress and social codes, which included not allowing them to listen to music.

In the country's sole mental hospital, conditions are clean but sparse. There are no fans to circulate the stifling air. The hospital's 60 beds are crowded into nine rooms.

Dr Najibullah Bekzad said the hospital, which was founded one year ago, is too small to handle the number of cases that are referred to it by other health facilities. He also complained that the electrical supply was unreliable.

He spoke of the night he tried to rush to one patient's room, oil lamp in hand, after hearing the sound of glass breaking. A 25-year-old hashish-addicted patient had broken a window and then cut himself. Because it took so long to get the lamp going, Bekzad felt he arrived at the scene too late. He said the hospital runs its electric generator for two to three hours in the evening. Power supply is not available for most of the night.

In a tent to the right of the hospital building, doctors tend to patients suffering from

drug addiction. The doctors see more than 100 addicts on an outpatient basis each day. About one third of those admitted to the hospital are drug addicts.

Shah said that many pregnant women, who are weary of their lives, depressed and suicidal, are also admitted to the mental health hospital.

People suffering from mental illness are rarely treated in hospital. Instead, they are likely to seek help at marastoons, shelters set up in Afghan cities that were originally intended to help destitute families, but now provide care for the elderly and the mentally ill.

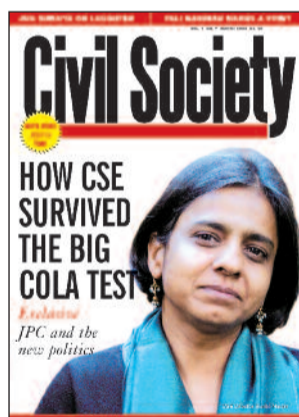
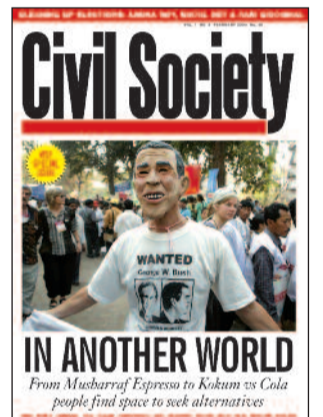
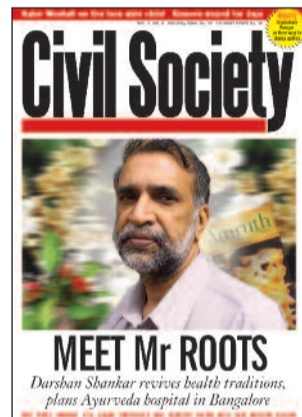
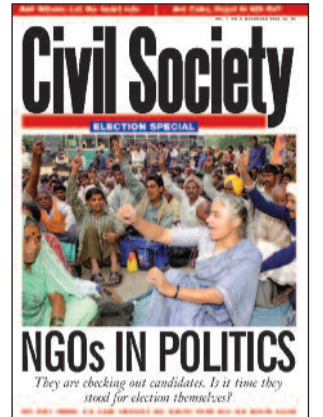
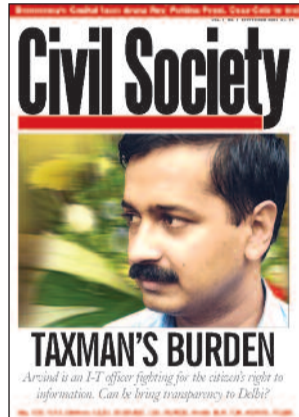
Others seek religious help to deal with mental illness. Many travel to the popular Mya Ali Ba Ba shrine in eastern province of Nangarhar, where patients are given only salt and pepper to eat and can sometimes be found chained to trees.

Both Pazhman and Dr Nadir Aksir, chief of the Ali Abad hospital, believe a bigger, better-equipped medical facility that meets international standards should be built.

(Institute for War and Peace Reporting)

LOOKING BACK. LOOKING AHEAD

THE BEST OF CIVIL SOCIETY



ONE YEAR OLD. GROWING

BECAUSE EVERYONE IS SOMEONE

Stratford is not Stratford International

Going abroad to study? Watch out for fake colleges

Civil Society News
London

AMIT Pramanik arrived in London from Mumbai in September 2003 to join the MBA course at 'Stratford University' in Tooting, SW London. He had heard about the university from Karan Gupta, counsellor with Mrijay International in Mumbai. Amit checked on the phone with the British Council, who assured him that Stratford was a good university. So he decided to leave his job as a Network Planning and Operation Engineer with Reliance Industries, take a substantial loan of nearly Rs 8 lakhs, and improve his career prospects with an internationally recognised degree.

Amit did not know that there are over 300 unregulated 'private' colleges and universities in the UK. The unregulated colleges apply for affiliation to universities in the US or another country. The government does not regulate these private colleges as the degrees are not certified in Britain.

Amit found that the college he'd joined was actually 'Stratford International University', based in Wyoming, USA, whose UK centre was in Tooting, run by Arif Hafeji. The classes were small, mostly Indian students, but they seemed okay to begin with. Only two of the four advertised modules were offered in the first semester. Hafeji told him that the college was planning to shift to central

London and things would improve.

The second semester began on 9th February, but classes were very irregular. When Amit complained to Hafeji about the irregular classes, he told him that the college had a new owner, Dr Khan, who had decided that Stratford International University was not good and so they would discontinue and link with a British university. This would happen by September and he suggested that Amit wait until then. He also indirectly threatened him that his visa would be discontinued if he didn't cooperate.

At the end of February all publicity for Stratford International University was removed and replaced with publicity for the London College of Management Science (LCMS). Early in March, Amit and other students were asked to sign on an attendance sheet for LCMS, because an inspection team was about to visit.

By this time Amit realised that things were seriously wrong and he consulted friends in his church and the local community. He requested Hafeji for a refund of the fees, which he refused, saying that classes would be resumed soon. Amit then contacted the Registrar at Stratford International University, Cecil Sherwood (whose office is in Vancouver). Amit was astonished to hear that Hafeji had informed the University that he had no students that year, as all their visas had been refused. He had neither registered any of

the students nor arranged for their exams and other academic requirements. The University then told Hafeji to refund fees to the students in Tooting.

He began to negotiate with the students, offering various amounts in return for an agreement not to say any more. Some of the students were willing to do this. Others did not care, because they got jobs and so had achieved their goal in coming to the UK -- not study but employment status.

Amit insisted on getting his money back with compensation. He had already lost a year and was completely traumatised. Hafeji threatened to declare bankruptcy so that Amit would not get any of his money back.

He finally managed to retrieve 4,000 pounds with help from South Asian Concern, whereas he had paid 5,600 pounds in tuition fees alone.

"I got involved because Amit is a member of our church. He was so pleased, when he first arrived, to be studying in the UK. But from January 2004 onwards he was increasingly frustrated and disappointed," says Robin Thomson, member of South Asian Concern.

South Asian Concern contacted various bodies, including the Home Office/Immigration Service and the local Wandsworth Trading Standards Council. The Home Office cancelled Stratford's classification. By mid-June the college had closed and Hafeji had disappeared.

Trading Standards found that the company under which Hafeji had operated had been dissolved. They tried to find the names of the directors but this was a company that had been 'bought off the shelf' as an existing entity and so there were no details of the new directors.

Amit is now a student at Greenwich University.

TRUE STORY: Amit spent Rs 8 lakhs and landed in one of 300 unregulated 'private' colleges in the UK.

Making schools more creative

Vidya Viswanathan
Bangalore

Student: Do atoms have colours?

Teacher: No... Well... I don't know I have never seen them.

Student: At what stage of assembly do they acquire colour then? All coloured things are made of atoms are they not?

THE teacher then had to write to a professor at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore and to a professor at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur to get a reply. The IIT Professor not only explained the phenomenon but also sent the school pictures of gold in different colour based on structure.

This is just one of the incidents that Rama Reddy, the founder of an alternate school called "Namma Shale" (Our School in Kannada) recounted at a meeting of the Wipro Applying Thought in Schools (WATIS) partners' forum in Bangalore in September.

There were several alternate schools making presentations. They ranged from the pioneering Shantiniketan, founded by poet Rabindranath Tagore, to Mirambika, the Aurobindo Ashram School in Delhi, the ten-year-old Center for Learning in Bangalore and Namma Shale.

"I found these case studies extremely useful" says Ashish Rajpal, an XLRI alumnus who after a long spell in the corporate sector went to Harvard to get himself a degree in education. He now runs an organisation called iDiscoveri that uses the outdoors to teach. In fact Rajpal had taken all the participants of the forum on an outbound trip to a fishing camp. They climbed rocks and walked rope bridges. They did team-building exercises, talked and shared experiences. "That really helped," says Maya Menon of the Teacher Foundation and Wipro's first partner. "We all got to know each other and so interactions at the forum have been meaningful," she says.

The WATIS programme started two years ago. Wipro's international clients, in a survey, indicated that they were dissatisfied with their supplier's employees. They felt that the Indians were technologically sound but had no initiative, could not work in teams, do not take risks or decisions. They were very good at carrying out orders. "Wipro then seems to have done some introspection. They get the best employees. And so it could be much worse," explains Menon, whom Wipro approached first. They had identified that the problem lay in education and so they started with schoolteachers first. "We go into classrooms and observe teachers. We get them to give each other feedback. We build trust and confidence."

The programme has 21 partners. And there are three programmes, teachers' development, school principals' leadership training and whole school transformation. The idea is to bring in creativity and critical thinking in education in mainstream schools across the country. Wipro bears two-thirds the cost of all training programmes and the school itself bears one-third the cost. The twenty-one partners meet once in six months to exchange notes and to discuss what is to be done next.

Many people who would love to have their children sent to alternate schools believe that not having exams till very late would not make their children competitive. Partho Ghosh, who helped set up the Mirambika school, contradicted that. He said a study undertaken by NCERT a few years ago of the first few batches of students graduating from Mirambika proved that they were doing better than other students and leaders. The Centre for Learning, which said that the main purpose of education and learning was

subversion pointed out that students from their school took up unconventional professions too.

The presentation about Shaniketan was very interesting. It started with the history of the time. The British wanted to control India by homogenising education. Education was also being industrialised to suit the new economy. The poet started the school as a protest against colonisation. The children still studied under a tree. A child could even be sitting on a tree. It was the teacher's duty to be engaging enough to

draw everyone's attention. Adjudication in the school consisted of three-member committee of students. Teachers could only recommend or negotiate with the committee. This presentation generated a lot of heated discussion.

There were questions raised about whether these alternate schools were not for the elite. Their student numbers were invariably less than a 100 and fees expensive. Were these methods also appropriate for large schools with a class size of more than fifty? It turned out that Rama's

school charged less than most normal schools and when a boy casually asked if she was getting rich on their fees, she turned over the accounts to a team of children. "They keep the accounts now," she smiles.

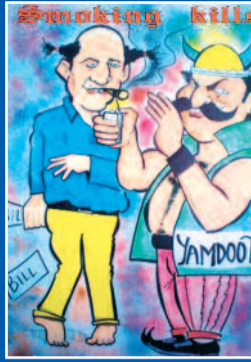
The whole school transformation programme involves a whole gamut of activities - the administrative processes of the school, parents, image of the school, how the children are learning. "We are almost the school," says Rajpal who is holding workshops for Heritage School parents in October. He explains that the admission process is a four-hour workshop for parents. He also points out that they do not interview children.

Wipro's international clients, in a survey, indicated that they were dissatisfied with their supplier's employees.

Smoke signals

"Kick the smoking habit!" was the message Generation Next sent out at the Burning Brain Society's poster-making competition. "Smoking is the vicious circle of death," said one poster. "Don't choke us," said another.

The contest was for students from Punjab, Haryana, Himachal and Chandigarh and was sponsored by BSNL.



Kavita Singh of Punjabi University, Patiala, and Jasraj Bhatti of DAV College, Chandigarh, shared the first prize. Ishita Mittal of PMLSD Public School and Satwinder Kaur of Harkrishan Public School, Chandigarh, won the second prize. And Priyanka Singh of Mohali got the third prize.

"The criteria were originality of the idea, depiction and relevance, age of the participant and the artistic style of the work," said Hemant Ramtirth Goswami of the Burning Brain Society.

The Dilli Ghalib knew

Manisha Sobhrajani
New Delhi

*I have made my home in the shadow of the mosque
This wicked fellow is now a neighbour of God*

...wrote Ghalib of his house next to a mosque in Gali Qasim Jan where he lived till his death in 1869.

Delhi got a peek into the life of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib through a week-long series of events. It was organised by Hindustani Awaaz, an organisation that popularises Hindi-Urdu culture, at the India International Centre, New Delhi.

The Ghalib festival began with an exhibition of photographs of havelis that the 19th century poet resided in, first editions of his manuscripts, drawings, hookas, portraits and other daily use items, sourced from the Ghalib Institute, Delhi, and private collections. An evening of Ghalib's ghazals, sung by Radhika Chopra and Sudeep Banerji, was also organised. Jamia Vice-Chancellor Mushirul Hasan talked about "Ghalib ki Dilli" and theatre person Habib Tanvir read from Ghalib's letters.

The purpose was to "bring Ghalib back into the mainstream," says organiser Rakhshanda Jalil, of Hindustani Awaaz, an organisation she started in July 2003. Ghalib was Bahadur Shah Zafar's favourite poet, muse, and teacher. He refused to become the 'court poet' but continued to hold a special position in Bahadur Shah's kingdom. However, after the fall of the king, Ghalib spent his last days in poverty. "He was one of the foremost geniuses of Delhi's cultural renaissance. He was part of a very tumultuous age—he bore witness to the mutiny of 1857—the fall of the Mughals—and his work reflects the angst that he suffered from," says Rakhshanda.

"The idea was to introduce Hindi-Urdu literature, to make space for the popular (not pedestrian), to build a bridge between Hindi and Urdu and also between high-brow and 'popular'. The intention was to take Hindi and Urdu together and attempt to carry it to the mainstream. And the medium of communication was to be Hindustani—neither pure Urdu nor *shuddh* Hindi—but an amalgam of the two," Rakhshanda said about her organisation and the nature of events that she organises.

Rakhshanda felt the need to create a platform where the two cultures could merge because "there was fear that nostalgia alone cannot keep languages alive. We need younger audiences"

'Raat Pashmine Ki' was the title given to a meeting and interactive session with the poet Gulzar. Another three-day festival on Ghalib is in the pipeline. Rakhshanda is a book editor and translator. She writes a monthly column on history and conservation issues and is a Visiting Fellow at the Jamia Milia University, New Delhi.

A painter is a painter

THE paintings on the wall were a blend of colours and inspired strokes. Any Art Gallery would have been proud of the display. If the right pair of eyeballs walked in, some of the paintings would probably sell at a neat price. The difference, we were told, is that the painters were disabled and this was the third art show organised by Family of Disabled at the Arpana Art Gallery in New Delhi. Corporate giant Alcatel sponsored the event. Actor Nandita Das lent energy to the occasion, her happy smile brightening up faces in the room.

Among the painters was Shrikant, inspired by mythology. Faces on his canvas, delicately depicted a range of emotion. His brush strokes are deft and clean. Incidentally, Shrikant works with only one arm. Savita does attractive geometric



Nandita Das at the exhibition

shapes in fetching colours. She's also won a few awards at the National Abilympics.

There were landscapes in water colours done by Geetika. Her painting contrasts the bright blue of the sea with the deep ochre of a sandy beach, perfectly. Geetika can't see

clearly so she taps her imagination.

Imamuddin, a sign-board painter for eight years, honed his talent at the Ranthambore School of Art. He's become an accomplished wildlife painter, depicting tigers in Rajasthan's forts and dry jungles.

Twenty-one-year old Jamaluddin Ansari feels strongly about the plight of women so he paints emotional pictures about their situation. Ram's oil and acrylic colours on canvas use strong colours—yellows, reds, browns and make an ambitious statement.

Simmiran works with crayons and does portraits with soft expressions of innocence.

"We finally removed the banner saying the paintings were by disabled artists. It didn't seem necessary," said Preeti Johar, one of the organisers. We agree.

Pinti's soap has lather

CHILDREN from Indraani Singh's school Literacy India, in Chauma village, Gurgaon, are on their way to being Bollywood stars. Vishal Bhardwaj, director of *Maqbool* and *Makdi*, has chosen five of them for his next film.

The children aren't strangers to acting. Singh's school has a repertoire which includes the Pied Piper of Hamelin, *Alibaba Aur Chalis Chor*, *Charandas Chor* and *Hamari Kahani*.

Their latest performance is *Pinti Ka Sabun*. It was staged at the Sri Ram Centre in New Delhi. The play was directed by Srivardhan Trivedi of the National School of Drama (NSD) and Ish Amotoj. Srivardhan has been the key person behind Literacy India's theatrical aspirations.

Pinti Ka Sabun is about a boy who

wins a cake of perfumed soap. He gets possessive about it and refuses to share his good fortune, antagonising near and dear ones. Instead he spends time dreaming about an imaginary glamorous girlfriend. The end is a happy one. Pinti becomes a hero and realises his mistake. He comes back to earth. His family



embraces him.

The play was not just a fairy tale. Some situations were about real life problems: like the hero telling the truth and getting beaten by the teacher, or his love-hate relationship with his classmates.

Pinti, the main character, of the play acted as entertainingly as a Bollywood hero. But so did the other actors. Shibani Kashyap did a nice cameo as Pinti's dream girl. The play was choreographed by Nikhil Ray. The original story was written by Sanjay Khati but the dialogues were written by the actors themselves.

Theatre maestro Zohra Sehgal was the chief guest. After the play the little actors met her and asked for her blessing, while the audience applauded.

Theatre in search of an audience

UMESH ANAND

Ananda Lal travelled to the US to study theatre. He went on to do a PhD, but returned to find that he couldn't get a job. There was no interest in theatre in India. So he took up an assignment to teach English literature at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. Lal is a successful professor, but he would really like to see theatre prosper, especially its rich traditional forms. Over the past seven years, he has orchestrated the work of 63 researchers to gather information from across India for the Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre.

OUP backed the project when no one was willing to invest a rupee in it and it is a good thing that the book is being promoted vigorously across cities. There was a launch at the British Council in New Delhi. Ananda, however, remains much the reclusive soul he has always been. A bird-watcher and a collector of music, he has been directing plays since the time he was in college, which was Presidency in Kolkata. The Oxford Companion To Indian Theatre will for a long time be the one book you can go to get a fix on a whole lot of talent which is being swept aside by cinema and television.

The importance of promoting theatre can't be overstated. Its probably the most democratic form of protest mankind has invented. If that disappears valuable neutral space will be lost.

Ananda stayed over with us at our place in Gurgaon recently and after omelettes and toasts for breakfast we pinned him down for an interview. Excerpts:

Is Indian theatre dying?

I see Indian theatre as a biodiverse ecosystem with hundreds of species. The extinction of even one is a major cause for concern. Indian theatre as a whole may not be dying but there are lots of forms that are threatened, mainly in the villages.

Certain kinds of theatre, like *jatra*, *nautanki*, *tamasha*, are well established. They are not going to die out. But there are smaller forms like the puppet tradition, or shadow puppetry that do not get an audience. They are unlikely to survive very long unless the government takes responsibility. These are pre-cinematic forms and because of the glamour associated with films no one is interested in them.

So how are *jatra*, *tamasha* and *nautanki* surviving?

It is because they had a head start. But where a form is limited to a district or a family, it is dying because the younger generation does not want to continue with the tradition since there is no money in it.

Should there be more practitioners?

There needs to be some way by which practitioners can pass down their knowledge to other people who may want to learn but may not be their own family members. Obviously their livelihood is what matters. When it comes to the crunch, it is money.

What is the social composition of rural theatre groups?

Apart from some temple theatre forms which have Brahmin performers, most rural theatre people come from lower castes anyway so their position is dual: themselves socially oppressed, but exploiting the form to express and possibly correct that oppression through satire and so on. If, for instance, the form dies where do these people get the chance to air those grievances freely. The audience also does not find the platform where that problem is expressed.

These older groups must have connected with their audience.

Oh yes and they still do. They still take up issues which



Ananda Lal

pertain to grassroot realities. Like the Brahmin oppressing the lower caste.

So somewhere this has gone wrong.

What has happened is that the audience feels it must watch television to remain up to date with the big city. They associate the city with upward mobility. If they cannot themselves migrate they would much rather watch a screen, which they think represents the city. Automatically they reject their own culture and art form.

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LAKSHMAN ANAND

Maybe it is necessary to capture urban migration?

I don't know what the solution is except for villagers to find out that the big city is not as glamorous as the screens make them out to be.

A similar kind of thing is happening to theatre in the city in terms of dwindling audiences. The difference is that something can be done if big corporates wake up to their responsibility of sponsoring local art. This is a tested system in the West where companies take pride in associating themselves with their community's dance, music or theatre. So their public image involves this kind of prestige. Unfortunately in India you can't find a company willing to do this.

That leaves theatre to the government.

Unfortunately in our country the government does not have the resources to invest in theatre as a priority. It could and should do more but there are limitations.

What about NGOs and the propagation of messages for development through performing arts?

The audience is no fool. Both the government and the NGOs often make the mistake of imposing messages through the art form in which case their aesthetic qualities are diminished. So the agenda becomes more important and the audience then associates the form with the message instead of its primary artistic content.

But isn't there any form of theatre that is making money?

Commercial theatre is an exception, obviously, but I'm not talking about the purely escapist entertainment that it dishes out.

This is difficult. How do you connect culture with commerce?

Historically speaking theatre was big business till the arrival of the movie.

It was the mainstream entertainment. After cinema and TV replaced theatre, things can never be the same again. I think the spectator must realise the basic difference between the two modes. The screen is unsurpassable in capturing reality. So it will always have an advantage in that area. But it is a "cold" or "frozen" form because the actor is not performing live. Theatre on the other hand has the ability to stimulate your imagination much more and there are human, vulnerable people on stage communicating with you directly.

Once audiences appreciate this difference they can accept theatre for what it gives rather than what it does not give. One thing film cannot do as well as theatre is criticise or question the establishment because there is too much investment at stake for a film or TV producer to risk alienating his audience. But in theatre, unit for unit, is much more socially aware and openly provokes and stimulates us to think about social issues.

Someone said long ago that the medium is the message. Given the power of the technologies that drive film and TV and now the Internet, what is the chance of theatre resurging as a medium?

Actually I see it happening already among my students. Many more want to actively participate than they used to earlier. I attribute this to a backlash from a surfeit of TV. Too much of the same thing. This had happened in the West earlier when the cable boom first took away theatre audiences and then disappointed them when they realised that the extra channels only meant variations of the same theme. So one hopes that the interest in theatre among youth translates into a resurgence.

Corporations in society revisited

SHANKAR VENKATESWARAN

A few years ago, if a company CEO was asked about the role of companies, the response would have been simple - to maximise profits and returns to its owners or shareholders. Today, most would talk about the larger role and responsibility of business beyond maximising profits, a notion broadly referred to as Corporate Social Responsibility or CSR.

The 1990s saw some intensive debates and writings on the issue, as globalisation took root and corporations began to rule the world (to borrow from the title of David Korten's immortal book). Individual companies, led by some really innovative work done by corporate organisations like International Business Leaders' Forum, Business for Social Responsibility, World Business Council for Sustainable Development to name a few and some others like John Elkinton of SustainAbility and Simon Zadek began to unpack the idea and provide meaningful ways by which companies could retain their place in society.

Despite the fact that so much has been written and spoken about globally on CSR, the understanding of CSR in India seems frozen in time. To most people in corporations, including CEOs, the practice of CSR is seen as merely complying with the law, something that some recent surveys also confirm!

Where companies go beyond that, they understand it as a new name for corporate philanthropy or charity and thus focus on just one of the stakeholders (albeit a critical one in the Indian context) - communities. Also, it tends to be less corporate and more CEO driven, so much so that it can almost be an acronym for CEO's Social Responsibility!

But life has moved on. CSR is about complying with the law and being philanthropic and more! Much, much more.....

Many companies argue that they pay their taxes and comply with all the laws of the land. What more should they do? There are two reasons why this is not enough to qualify as a responsible company. First, non-compliance with the law means that the company is operating illegally.

Therefore, compliance merely gives it the right to stay in business and nothing else. Why is there a need to invent a term for companies operating legally? A company that is acting responsibly has to be one that is not only complying with the law but going beyond it. Secondly, as laws everywhere are increasingly influenced by companies, compliance with these laws can hardly be termed as remarkable.

Isn't Corporate Community Development the same as CSR? The question is a bit more complex than that. A company that gives crores of rupees to charity can claim that it is being socially responsible.

But, if in the process of earning these crores, it exploits labour or pollutes the environment beyond legal limits or does not ensure that its suppliers are paid sufficiently so that they are able to maintain basic wage and working conditions for their workers, it is NOT being socially responsible.

Having spent several years working on CSR in India, I have come to the conclusion that the reason why the idea of CSR is not fully understood is that it uses the term "social". Somehow, that seems to suggest to everyone that CSR refers to companies doing "social work" and so nobody wants to think beyond that. And many NGOs, who suffer from the same myopia, perpetuate this notion by telling companies that by funding them, they are being socially responsible.

Globally, there is a broad convergence of the meaning of the term CSR around two ideas: maximising positive and minimising negative impacts of a company's activities on all its stakeholders and measuring company performance on the "triple-bottom-line" - financial, social and environmental.

At the minimum, a socially responsible business is one that ensures that its business processes do not socially or environmentally harm any of its stakeholders, particularly the most disadvantaged i.e. communities, employees (including contract and casual labour), suppliers (including its smallest supplier), customers (especially its low-value ones), shareholders and so on, beyond what is

required by law. Additionally, socially responsible businesses would attempt to maximise the positive impacts on these disadvantaged stakeholders, beyond what is required by law and support sustainable community development efforts to the extent it has the resources to do so.

Perhaps the answer lies in coining a new term for the idea. Perhaps, Corporate Responsibility to Society?

Therefore, being socially responsible is not an activity but a way of doing business. Perhaps, a more useful description of a socially responsible company is one that operates in a manner in which the social and environmental impacts on all its stakeholders is net positive and exceeds legal requirements.

While many Indian companies have a long way to go in coming up to speed with existing thinking on CSR, there are a few issues that are still not on the radar screen. These fall in the realm of business in society. They are the formulation of regulations and public policy and combating corruption and communalism.

As India becomes more globalised, many public policies and regulations are increasingly adversely affecting poor communities. For instance, while developing product standards, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) expert panel consists of people from the manufacturers of the products.

All laws relating to displacement of people due to setting up factories (including the proposed amendments to the Land Acquisition Act) are increasingly in favour of business and to the detriment of the persons being displaced, who are typically illiterate and who will stand to lose the only resource that their skills can exploit - land. And monetary compensation results in consumption and further deepening and feminising poverty.

In a country like India, companies play a significant (and many would argue, disproportionate) role in formulation of public policies. Come January every year, captains of industry are found less in their own offices and more in the Finance Ministry in Delhi in various consultations leading to the annual budget!

It is of course quite legitimate for a company or a business coalition to seek to influence public policy that enhances their business. But a socially responsible company would seek to influence such policies and regulations in a manner that, at the very least, is not harmful to those less powerful than them and, preferably, in a manner that benefits both business and the larger society.

A recurrent lament in Pavan Verma's monumental work, "The Great Indian Middle Class" is the lack of role models in India. Present day politicians leave most in despair and academics seemed to be increasingly marginalised in a world that has no time to read and think. Cricketers and film stars seem to be more admired for their wealth than as thought leaders. There is clearly a need for more Kalpana Chawlas - achievers based on sheer merit, talent and a commitment to give back to society!

Industry leaders have the potential to play this role as some, most notably JRD Tata, have played in the past. Anu Aga and Deepak Parekh are some people who spoke out after the Gujarat carnage in 2002.

If we look at the two burning issues that threaten to tear India apart - corruption and communalism - who better than a socially responsible company and its leadership to show the way. By practicing and promoting corruption-free and secular behaviour, companies and their employees can play a significant role in transforming India. Not just for their benefit but to benefit the nation.

Perhaps never before has it happened that senior company executives have an opportunity and potential to become real leaders in thought and action. But are they listening? Are they ready for the challenge?



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