

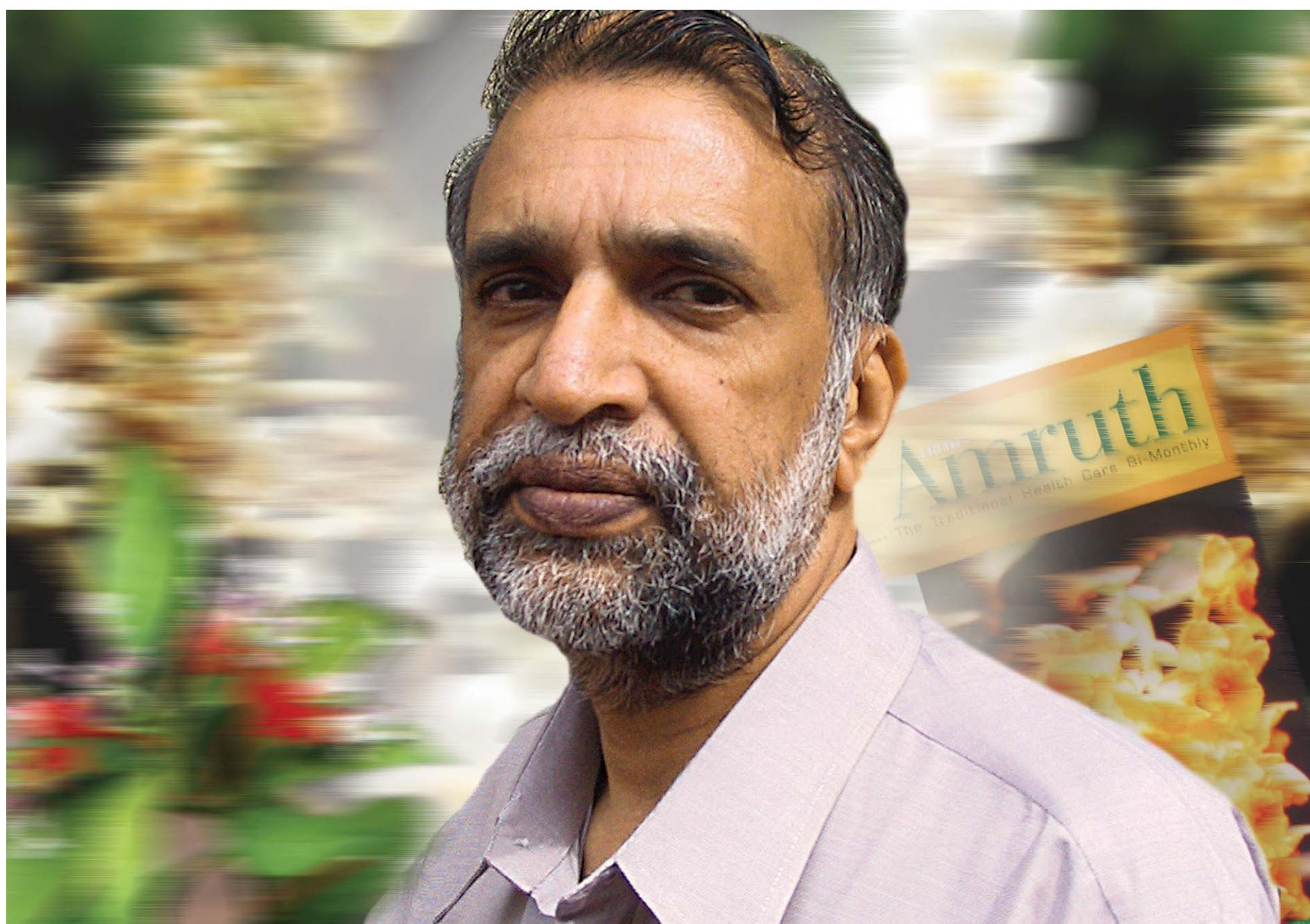
Kabir Mustafi on the less able child

Geneva award for Jaju

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DEBATE
Jayaprakash
Narayan
on three ways to
change politics

Civil Society



MEET Mr ROOTS

*Darshan Shankar revives health traditions,
plans Ayurveda hospital in Bangalore*

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COVER STORY



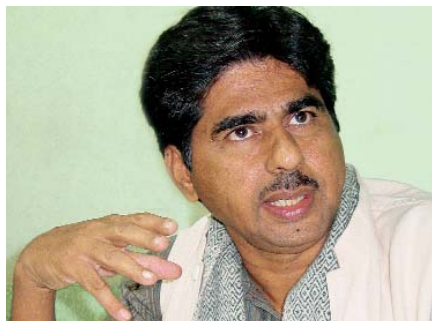
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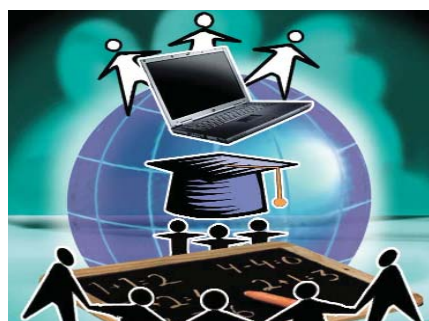
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Civil Society

Darshan and Dr GG

OUR cover story this month began some six years ago when I chanced upon Dr G. Gangadharan at the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy in Coimbatore. On a sabbatical from my job at The Times of India, I had backpacked my way across Kerala, spent some days watching the KSSP put a micro hydel project in place at Palakkad and then taken the night bus to Coimbatore to find out more about the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy. Gangadharan was Dr GG to everyone. And there he sat, the much loved and respected Dr GG, a young man with a senior presence, surrounded by Ayurvedic formulations packaged in modern ways with stridently trendy names. A first rate physician, he had been put in charge of marketing at the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy because this reputed company, with the philanthropy of its owners, had found itself in a terrible time warp. It had knowledge, it had credentials, but in a rapidly growing market for traditional herbal remedies, it did not know how to make money. And money it needed if it was going to survive and shoulder the many responsibilities it had accumulated over the years.

As I sat talking to Dr GG, a call came from Bangalore. It was a certain Darshan Shankar, famous for his innovative work with medicinal plants, and a prominent member of my shortlist of people worth meeting. I made use of the coincidence to talk to Darshan, fixed an appointment and turned up at his office two days later after a bus ride to Bangalore. The two and a half hours I spent with him were really quite amazing. I think I still have the tape somewhere. He transformed my understanding of public health care and traditional medicine. I left thirsting to know more.

Over the years Darshan has, in his gentle and affectionate way, done more to change policy and push the government into action than most strident NGO leaders. Ask your self how many times you have heard of him. And yet, if there is a medicinal plants board in this country, if Indian systems of medicine have a formal status in the health ministry, it is because of his efforts.

Darshan has now brought Dr GG to Bangalore to work with the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), the NGO he set up in 1993. An Ayurveda hospital is on the cards. Its principal goal will be to give Ayurveda its due as a science in its own right. It will seek to build credible bridges between the worlds of traditional Indian medicine and modern western medicine. Is this too ambitious? As is the case with most new things worth doing, only time will tell.

It is a frightening thought, but Kabir Mustafi is a childhood friend. The years have clearly flown. We go back to Calcutta. He set out in life running a travel consultancy. We polished off many a bottle of Sikkimese white rum together when he and Kamini lived down the road in New Alipore. Kabir went on to become a teacher. And from a teacher he became a headmaster. From end to end, he has seen it all. Kabir draws on all his valuable experience to pen this month's essay. He will be writing regularly for *Civil Society*.

We caught up with Rajgopal of the Ekta Parishad at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He is just back from an electoral battle in which the Ekta Parishad supported Digvijay Singh. We all know what happened to Digvijay and the big question for Rajgopal is whether this open political affiliation will make the Ekta Parishad less effective now that a BJP government will be in power in Madhya Pradesh. Rajgopal does not seem to think it will, saying he has always talked with the BJP. Whatever that may mean, these elections have shown once again that NGOs are better off keeping an equidistance from political entities.

Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta was in Delhi with his proposals for changing the electoral system. Rather than report him, we asked him to write so that a debate can begin. Contributions are welcome.

Finally special mention needs to be made of Sanjay Jaju, the innovative IAS officer in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. His efforts at bridging the digital divide and delivering transparent governance have earned him international accolades at the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva. His is no mean achievement. The country needs more Jajus.

Umesh Anand

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CAUSE & EFFECT

Finally, probe hits the road

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Union government's decision to have the CBI investigate the death of an upright engineer has been the result of an extensive campaign by the Indian Express and concerned individuals.

Thirty-one-year-old Satyendra Dubey, an engineer from IIT, Kanpur, was shot dead in Gaya on November 27. He was employed by the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) to work for the Golden Quadrilateral project, a roadway linking Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi.

Dubey was overseeing a 60 km road from Aurangabad to Barachatti, in Bihar. He had written to the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, on November 11, 2002, exposing rampant corruption in the project.

His letter stated that detailed project reports by design consultants were so badly done that they could not be implemented, without major modifications. Tenders were floated on the basis of these faulty reports. The procurement process was hijacked by big contractors who were submitting "forged documents to justify their technical and financial capabilities."

Contractors received help from NHAI officials who were in a hurry to pay advance money, so that they could collect their commissions. The entire mobilisation advance of 10% of contract value, was paid upfront without ensuring that contractors actually carried out the work. NHAI was opting for international competitive bidding. In reality, the work was being sub-contracted.

Dubey wrote as a concerned citizen and requested anonymity. Instead, his letter was bounced to bureaucrats in the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, to NHAI and its Chief Vigilance Officer.

Angry citizens were galvanised to act. "We do not want his sacrifice to go in vain," said Ashutosh Aman, a 1994 IIT Kanpur student and a classmate of Dubey's who has started the SK Dubey Foundation in Miami, Florida with US based IITians. Initially, they will raise Rs 10 lakh for Dubey's family, ensure his pension reaches them and establish an interest-bearing account.

A Delhi-based lawyer, Rakesh Upadhyay, filed a PIL in the Supreme Court urging the court to ask the government to protect whistleblowers. The petitioner requested a safety system based on the Whistle Blower Act, recommended by the Constitution Review Commission in 2002. It asked for the Dubey case to be transferred to the CBI.

A draft law called The Public Interest Disclosure (Protection of Information) Bill has been gathering dust since two years. It protects whistleblowers and had been submitted by Justice BP Jeevan Reddy. "Had this law been enacted, Dubey would not have died," said Reddy.

An advocate, MP Gupta, filed a PIL in the Patna High Court. The court has directed the Bihar government to submit a dedicated plan pledging foolproof security to engineers, on site.

'We worked with Cong, talked with BJP'

Rajgopal of Ekta Parishad says parties come and go

Civil Society News
New Delhi

DURING the recent Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, the Ekta Parishad and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, (NBA), the two largest people's organisations in the state, took different political stands. The Ekta Parishad threw its weight behind the Digvijay Singh government. The NBA, angry about the lack of progress on the rehabilitation of people ousted by the Sardar Sarovar dam project, opposed the Congress and backed grassroots organisations. As a result, a full-fledged spat broke out.

Ekta Parishad said the Digvijay Singh government had championed its cause by providing water, forests and land to tribals. Through a Task Force, which worked with the government, Ekta Parishad undertook land distribution to the Dalits. It claims to have allotted over 150,000 plots and halted eviction of tribals from forests.

But in the end, the BJP won a landslide victory. The Congress lost and so did all the activists backed by the NBA.

PV Rajgopal, convener of Ekta Parishad was in New Delhi to attend a National Consultation on People's Participation in Land Reform organised by his group. In an interview to *Civil Society*, he said Ekta Parishad will work with whoever is in power.

You openly backed the Congress. Why?

Yes, I admit we took a political position. But I'm also concerned that others did not take that position. As a result, the BJP came to power. On one side, you oppose secular forces and then you cry about communal forces. I agree, one has the right to decide, but still I am sad about it. We opposed the BJP, because how do you work with a communal party.

Will you work with the BJP now that it is in power?

In a democracy different political parties will naturally come to power and one has to work with them. You see, even while supporting the Digvijay Singh government, I was talking to the BJP. I believe in dialogue. I told them, why is it that we don't work together? There are so many reasons. There should be some common areas. So they said tell us what you want. Write a page about your jal, jangal, jameen agitation and land reforms agenda, we will put it in our manifesto, so I wrote it.

Did they include it in their agenda?

Yes. Because of our lobbying, *jal jangal jameen* are in the agenda of all political parties. But the BJP has gone a step further. In Chattisgarh they said they will regularise land up to 1990 and



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Ekta Parishad was described as a Naxalite organisation. Our workers were harassed. I went to the highest police officer to object. He said no such record exists. Only towards the end, Digvijay said in a public meeting, if Ekta Parishad is a Naxalite organisation, then he is also a Naxalite. So you can understand how much we had to fight to save our workers. But Digvijay Singh recognises us as a grassroots organisation. We were providing him issue-based support.

Were you satisfied with the Congress government's performance in the social sector?

They could not do it wholeheartedly. The problem is all political parties have their mafias. There are land mafias, pond mafias, forest mafias. When you are in a party you make a lot of compromises. So to bring in a radical agenda is very difficult. I told the Congress government, again and again, take the people's organisations into confidence and go

ahead. Break your thread with the middle-class and tie it with the poor and you will be chief minister for many years. But to get out of this circle is very difficult.

If the RSS implements your causes, what will be your response?

It's an interesting question you ask. Certainly, we would like our agenda to be implemented. But at the same time we cannot ignore the macro-level implications and our commitment to secularism. The RSS has its own cadres. They don't need us.

The NBA has been at loggerheads with the state government over the rehabilitation issue. Has Ekta Parishad taken it up?

The point of complication is that the MP government says they don't have land. My argument is that revenue land is available. But has NBA got the courage to actually take it? You can't do it alone. We can join hands.

Okay, so the land being given is rocky. But you can do dry-land farming, grow bamboo, raise plantations. But first, at least get the land for the people. After that let the community decide how they would like to develop it.

The government now says what is the use of distributing rocky barren land? Look at industry. They are willing to take an acre of wasteland. Why? Because they get water bodies with it and they develop it.

Because of our lobbying, *jal jangal jameen* are in the agenda of all political parties

issue *pattas* (title deeds). Somebody told Uma Bharati that this *jal jangal jameen* are not your agitation. She said no, it is. We will give land to the tribals. And the way the adivasis have voted for the BJP this time, you can see it's because they have made big promises to them.

What difference did your support to the Congress make?

No political party can really afford to ignore us. I believe our support to the Congress made a difference in 26 constituencies. Anyway, I will try to work with the BJP, otherwise we will do the same thing we did with the Digvijay Singh government. We will start rallies, public hearings, *padyatras* (foot marches) demonstrations.....

Are you saying your relationship with the Digvijay Singh government was not as cosy as made out to be?

You are saying I had a cosy relationship? Well, in the government's records

Ladakh's traditions find a market

WAL has figured out how to make women feel superior

Rathi A Menon
Leh

WOOLLENS dipped in natural dyes, ethnic restaurants and organic food are projects being run by the Women's Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) in Leh to revive local tradition. Many sound practices were dying out, because locals were getting an inferiority complex about the old ways. WAL makes Ladakhi women proud of their culture and encourages them to carry on with sustainable practices and earn an income.

One clear sign of success is at the WAL centre. Here you find Ladakhis, other Indians and foreigners eating Ladakhi bread and sipping hot butter tea. The traditional greeting of 'Juley' flies around as visitors stop to buy organically raised grains, pulses and fruit produce.

Dolma Tsering, WAL's ebullient executive director, narrates how they became aware of this deep sense of inferiority. Dolma and her girls had gone to the Zaskar region on an awareness campaign in 1991-92. When night fell, they couldn't find shelter in the village. "Finally we gate-crashed into a house and told the women we needed just a corner to sleep in and whatever food they had cooked. Out came the truth. They were worried whether we city women would like their food and their lifestyle. A kind of inferiority complex in being Ladakhi.

By morning, they accepted us as one of them. Now they come here to discuss their problems and our programmes," says Dolma with a laugh.

"People don't waste anything in Ladakh. They know how to use and take care of natural resources. In fact, the Buddhist philosophy of interrelationship and interdependence is reflected in Ladakhi life. The grazing of an entire village's sheep is done by the families that own them in rotation," she adds.

Pointing to her office ceiling, Dolma says, "See that dried padding between the willow and poplar layers. That is the Yaktse plant. No insects can get through this. The padding will never get spoilt. Even after three or four generations, it can be reused. But nowadays, people prefer paper, which is more perishable and can't give you the same natural protection."

Started in 1991, the WAL movement has spread all over

Ladakh with 5,600 members in more than 100 villages. WAL trains women in knitting, tailoring, natural dyeing and weaving. "Men did the weaving, but they have moved to towns for work. Women do all the work now. So we conduct these workshops here as well as in villages, but only in winter when there's no farming."

The craft shop at WAL offers woollen bags, coats, caps and beautifully printed scarves and shawls. "For the natural dyes, we use roots and plants they collect from the mountains." Showing me an elegant shawl, Dolma says, "This yellow shade is from the roots of the Dulu. Mix the dye with soda and



Started in 1991, the WAL movement has spread all over Ladakh with 5,600 members in more than 100 villages. WAL trains women in knitting, tailoring, dyeing and weaving.

you get this camel colour. Isn't it beautiful?"

A more daunting task is involving young girls in farming and craft activities. "They want to move to the cities. We try to train them, let them go back to their villages and create the products on their own. When they start making profits sitting at home, others too get motivated."

"To get girls interested in farming, we tell mothers to familiarise the children with the different aspects of farming along with their education.

Let them water the fields for a change or make some handicraft items. We can sell them and give them pocket money."

WAL is looking for a shop in Leh's main market from where it can sell such products. "The ongoing rates for shops are beyond our pocket. Let us see," says Dolma.

WAL members have also started ethnic food restaurants in villages on well-used trekking routes such as Stok, Wanlah and Hinju. For the trekker who is sick of Maggi noodles and rice, the delicious thukpas and steaming momos are a welcome treat. "We gave them basic training and utensils. Now they are on their own. We will be opening similar eating places in Nubra and between Hemis Shukpachan and Stigmosgang," says Dolma.

You can contact them at tsewans@sanchamet.in

A Dalit rally sets out from Delhi

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A rally aimed at highlighting the condition of the Dalits was flagged off by KR Narayanan, former President of India, from New Delhi on December 6. Rallyists similarly set out from Jammu, Kolkata and Kanyakumari to congregate in Mumbai on January 16 for the World Social Forum (WSF).

The Dalit Swadhikar Rally has been organised by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and Act Now for Harmony and Democracy (ANHAD). Its purpose is to tell people about the negative impact of privatisation, globalisation and liberalisation on the Dalits. An exhibition called "Hidden Apartheid" will accompany the rally.

Mr Narayanan described the rally as a movement of great significance. "The

Dalit condition is the touchstone of the condition of India. The voice of the Dalits is the voice of the common people," he said. The rally will converge in the heart of India and the former President hoped all marginalised people would join to make it truly revolutionary.

Paul Divakar, Dalit activist, said the gains made through the Indian Constitution and the untiring efforts of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar were being eroded by globalisation. One purpose of the rally is to educate the Dalits about globalisation's impact on access to land and water.

Harsh Mander, Country Director, Action Aid, spoke about the condition of Dalits in modern India. Nearly 1142 forms of untouchability are still practised in 13 major cities. Women continue to work as scavengers and receive stale food as payment. Children are

made to sit separately in schools. Dalits are denied access to temples and water sources. The Musahar community don't even own homes and live in fear of eviction. "These realities should shame us, instead the issues are distant from social and political discourse," he said. "Can we get a pedestrian path for the poor to cross?"

Trade unions and women's organisations will join the rally, wherever it pauses, to express solidarity. "Unless we remove caste, we cannot remove communalism," said Amarjit Kaur, secretary, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

The rally is an assertion of Dalit identity against casteism and communalism. Dalit rights to land, water, food, health, education and employment will be articulated. The rallyists oppose all forms of patriarchy and emphasise the right of Dalit women to live with dignity. The

rights of children and the individuality of Dalit culture is upheld. The rally asks for inclusion of Dalits in panchayats, devolution of power to the grassroots, and people-friendly governance. The rallyists seek unity with secular, democratic, socialist forces to combat the anti-people policies of the state and the global market.

Hidden Apartheid will take this message to the people. The exhibition consists of 50 posters and photographs which talk about untouchability, state violence, lack of employment or justice and the plight of dalit women and children. An action plan to remove injustice, has also been drawn up.

The exhibition was researched by Shabnam Hashmi of Anhad. Parvez, a young graphic designer from Baroda designed the posters. Sahir Raza, of Youth4Peace shot the photographs.

A PANCHAYAT FOR HOMELESS

They gather in a shelter in Delhi's walled city to discuss their problems

Civil Society News
New Delhi

FOR a man without a roof, home is where the imagination finds one. Every fourth Sunday, when New Delhi's homeless gather at a panchayat in the walled city, the outline of a house is etched on the wall. Fragrant flowers lie scattered. Five panches, jury members elected by them, listen to their problems. These are placed before the community. The solutions are arrived at by consensus.

The idea of a panchayat came from the first Mahapanchayat of the homeless held on February 23 this year, by Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA) a project of Action Aid. More than 623 homeless drew up a memorandum demanding 100 permanent shelters, permission for street vending, facilities for banking, identity cards, ration cards and separate shelters for women, the mentally ill and handicapped. It was decided that a panchayat should be convened, once a month, so that the homeless could discuss their problems.

The venue of the panchayat is a night shelter, run by AAA. The five panches, who hold centre-stage, are 70-year-old Prithvi Chandala, Sajuddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar and young Raju. Bina is the lone woman, an indefatigable homeless activist.

Before the panchayat gets down to serious business, the national anthem is sung with fervour. Then Vinod from Ramdas lane complains the person in charge of his shelter insists that everybody should sleep close together, so that more homeless fit in. But some sleepers are sick, maybe diseased, he said.

The person in charge said he couldn't always predict how many people would come, so he was only being cautious. Besides, people sleeping in single rows looked neat. Vinod countered and said if more people came they



SAAB PRESS

could always create space.

The panchayat decided that the distance between sleepers could be calculated. Taking the size of the room into account, about 15 people per row could be the desired length. Sick people should sleep in a different

row with a little more space in between.

The next problem was of alcoholism. Sometimes one or two men would arrive at the shelter, dead drunk and disturb the rest. The complainants felt that it was unfair of two to disturb the sleep of 30, so drunks should be debarred.

Abdul Jabbar one of the panches said the shelter was meant to reform people. "What we can do is to put pressure on them to change." "We should not boycott each other, if we stand united we can defeat even this government, like we defeated the British," said Chandala.

Members said moderate drinking was advisable but if people insisted on arriving drunk they could be warned. If they still did not listen, entry may be debarred for a few nights.

Ashok, a former alcoholic, urged members to refrain altogether and related his experience. He said UP and Bihar were backward because of alcoholism.

Virendra from Arambagh said he had fallen sick and had no money to go to a doctor. Usman, the person in charge of the night shelter, took time to help him. Usman said Virendra had abused him, but Arvind, a colleague had arranged medical treatment and food. The panches told Virendra to always keep money in his pocket. Virendra apologised for his behaviour.

Sajuddin Ahmed informed the gathering that the police had stopped harassing the rickshaw pullers of Arambagh after AAA activists arranged an interface between the two.

The problem began when a doctor hit two rickshaw pullers, who were relaxing in their rickshaws, with his car. They were seriously injured. The guilty doctor tried to cover his tracks by bribing the police and getting the rickshaw pullers evicted from the hospital while they were undergoing treatment. The police then started harassing the rickshaw pullers. But now the police are nervous of them, said Sajuddin with an air of satisfaction.

Two men entertained their brothers with a magic show and some jokes. Tea was passed around, followed by the national anthem. The panchayat was declared over and the homeless melted away into the city's streets, once again.

AAA going national

In December 2002, Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA) started taking over night shelters in Delhi to protect the homeless from freezing to death. Since then the programme has expanded to include health, education, livelihood and a postal service for the homeless.

AAA is now going national. They have found out the condition of the homeless in Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Secunderabad, Kolkata and Lucknow. Three homeless people from Delhi, Deepak, Uday and Navneet helped to gather data.

According to Indu Prakash Singh of Action Aid, Delhi has the largest number of homeless, followed by Kolkata and Chennai. Lucknow has a smaller figure of about 10,000, mostly men between 26 to 40 years of age.

In the south, there are more women with their families living on the street. "In Chennai, between 23 to 40% of families have been homeless for nearly three generations. In this situation, a shelter cannot suffice. What families need are homes," says Indu Prakash.

In Delhi, the homeless comprise migrants from many regions. But in the south, most

migrate from surrounding areas and form a homogenous population. In Chennai, 23% are from Salem district. Only 2% are from outside the state. Most are Dalits and Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

Police brutality is constant in every city, says Indu Prakash. The antiquated Vagrancy Act gives the police powers to arrest people for "wandering about". "Shabbily dressed people crossing the road, or destitute women outside temples are picked up and thrown into beggar's homes which are worse than jails," says Paramjit Kaur, project director AAA, "it takes half a minute for the magistrate to sentence them." AAA is planning to file a PIL in the Supreme Court to get the Vagrancy Act repealed.

Identity cards to prevent police harassment, are being issued. "We are not certifying character," says Indu Prakash. In Kolkata, nearly 90% of homeless do not have any proof of identity.

Health problems, mostly malnutrition and anaemia are widespread. Of equal concern is mental health. While schizophrenia and depression are frequent among women, alcoholism and substance abuse are common among men.

Jaju brings home Geneva award

E-seva project rescues West Godavari district

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IN the age of electronics, the Indian government is drowning in paper. Corruption is rampant, and efficiency missing. The rural E-seva project in Andhra Pradesh's West Godavari district, proves that the right blend of technology, management and social responsibility can improve governance.

The E-seva project won the Tony Zeitoun award at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). It was selected as one of the Best ICT Stories

The E-seva project provides access to several C2C (citizen-to-citizen) and C2G (citizen-to-government) services through Web-enabled kiosks, or E-seva kendrams, run by women self-help groups (SHGs) from the poorer segments of society. The E-seva kendrams are on a district-wide network connected to the district server. To save on networking costs, the project has developed a special synchronisation tool that allows the kiosks to work offline and lets the databases be periodically synchronised in minimal time. The district portal, <http://www.westgodavari.org>, is hooked on to the Internet.

Since December 2002, the E-seva kiosks have carried out 30,000 transactions, delivered 1,20,000 government certificates and Rs 50 million worth of electricity bills without a hitch. Citizens can

download forms, pay their taxes, file grievances and access several departments. Schemes floated by the government and a special page on education are also posted. The portal expects to become a virtual meeting place where people can discuss local problems and solutions.

The district has 22,000 SHGs. Out of a total population of 3.8 million, in West Godavari district, nearly 1.8 are women. Initially, the government gave the women an upfront subsidy. Bank loans paid for the equipment. Now, the SHGs collect user charges. An analysis of the kiosks' monthly turnover shows that the women are repaying the loans and earning an income.

Sanjay Jaju, West Godavari collector and district magistrate, is the bright spark behind the project. "To my mind, the immediate need was to give the administration a citizen-centred focus and use technology for storing, retrieving, processing and doling out information," he says. "Technology processes information efficiently and ensures that non-performers can't hide. It

also eliminates the discretionary advantages and favours possible in a tech-less system."

The district training centre provided training and consultancy as a partner in



Sanjay Jaju, West Godavari collector and district magistrate

the project. Another partner, the district computer centre, came up with new features and services in the district portal. It took them three months to do all this. Meanwhile, the SHGs were trained to handle computers and understand the entire process.

The success of the project rested on the back-office computerisation of various government departments. "Before starting, every office needs to do some groundwork, by weeding out incorrect procedures, lengthy formalities and, above all, getting the right people through training and re-staffing," explains Jaju.

The scale of operation is large. Therefore, databases that make retrieval and sorting of data easy and quick are needed. User-friendly access to the databases is the next step. Network and connectivity follow so that computers and databases can talk to each other without human intervention. "Once the databases are ready, all further transactions should be compulsorily routed through them so that they are routinely updated and remain relevant at all times," says Jaju. After that, these databases should be put in the public domain.

"The design of the project is from the demand side rather than the supply side," says Jaju. The project did not require marketing because citizens know what services the government offers. The big difference is that the E-seva kendram is run by familiar faces and provides access to sarkari services minus the hassle.

Sri Lanka makes a smart move

Barun Roy
Kolkata

SRI Lanka may be at the bottom of e-governance right now, but if a pilot project goes as planned, it might find itself at the top.

The five-year, \$300 million project, for which the World Bank has provided \$100 million, is designed to create a government-wide network where none exists, lay down e-governance policies and strategies to make the administration more open, establish telecentres in rural areas to bring them into the administrative mainstream, introduce national smart cards, and stimulate social applications by NGOs and the private sector.

The idea is to increase government accountability, provide transparency in public procurement, coordinate the activities of different government departments and agencies, manage projects more efficiently, reduce business costs, integrate all government and private sector institutions, and, above all, make the government more accessible to people.

The project is also being seen as an effort that will help Sri Lanka's ICT software industries to be globally competitive.

The order may sound tall, but there are reasons to believe it will be delivered. First, there's a high degree of government commitment to the project - an ICT Bill was endorsed by Parliament in August - and the World Bank has expressed a desire to help the initiative all the way. Second, with its small population and physical size, the country can be easily "wired." And third, the population is highly literate - 92% - and so is easily trainable. Besides, the people's awareness of ICT is also high. As Sri Lanka's IT minister Milinda Morogoda puts it, "Every mother in every village wants her children to know IT."

Another reason why "e-Sri Lanka," as the ambitious project is called, will work is that it's a joint public-private endeavour. A separate high-powered agency has been created to implement the project, with people from both the government and the private sector, and will operate like a private institution under a chief administrative officer.

As Sri Lanka moves towards peace, seeking an end to a long and bloody civil war, there's a growing awareness that the government must move rapidly to rebuild the country and ensure that the benefits of peace are felt early. "E-Sri Lanka," along

with an aggressive development of the ICT sector, is seen as the lever that will help accelerate economic and social development and give people a bigger role in governance.

Meanwhile, an equally ambitious ICT initiative, called Info-Share, was officially launched in Colombo last November to govern the ongoing peace process and bring to it the widest possible transparency. Essentially, the project will provide a highly secure common platform that all the parties in the peace process can share to exchange their views and ideas, submit proposals, review presentations, check each other's online status, set tasks and milestones, schedule and host online meetings, and do a host of other things.

The idea behind such a shared space is to break communication barriers, often the major obstacle in any resolution of conflicts. In Sri Lanka the problem is particularly acute since information on the country's ethno-political conflict is extremely scarce. Peace efforts are also frustrated because nobody really knows what's going on or who's doing what. Initiatives and agendas often overlap and there's no cohesion among the agencies involved.

With Info-Share, funded by Groove

Network, a leading provider of desktop collaboration software, and US Agency for International Development, rival teams can work on the platform any time and from any location, online or offline. According to Groove, all project activities are automatically and securely synchronized between team members' PCs, eliminating the need for manual updates via e-mail. With lateral idea-sharing and information exchange, every stakeholder in the peace process will know where it stands.

Groove was founded in October 1997 by Ray Ozzie, best known as the creator of Lotus Notes, and has Microsoft and Intel as strategic partners. "This system of shared space to break communication barriers has been tried in several other situations," said Hannes Siebert, international peace activist and co-manager of the Sri Lanka project.

Once the project is up and running, hopefully within the next two years, it is expected to help the government in a more fundamental way. The system can be used, in much the same way as for peace negotiations, to identify the development needs of rural communities, speed up the allocation of grants, and manage grants more efficiently.



Youngsters get their first lesson in medicinal plants out in the wilds

TRADITION MATTERS

Darshan Shankar promotes medicinal plants and traditional health practices. Last month, he flew to New York to receive one of Columbia University's most prestigious awards. He now plans a unique Ayurveda hospital in Bangalore. Civil Society tracks him and his work.

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

IN 1980, a young man, not in a hurry, gave up a university existence in Bombay to live among the tribals of Maharashtra's Karjat district. What he saw there changed his life forever. A tribal identity, he realised, came in more weaves than the urban mind could readily grasp. It drew on its own springs of culture and knowledge. And Karjat, he understood, was just a dot on the map of India. In its complexities were

intimations of many such dots, each with its own intricacies. No education was enough to put this picture together, let alone unravel it, for each dot was a university in itself.

So, he settled in to learn and, among many things, was struck by the fact that modern medicine, as he had known it in the city, did not exist here. Instead, for every common ailment there was a plant that served as a ready remedy. When a friend fell ill with jaundice, he consulted a tribal healer, who promised treatment. Two days passed before the healer turned up again saying that he had gone deep into the forest to get the plant that was needed. The plant provided dramatic results and the jaundice disappeared.

Similarly, lactating mothers among the Karjat tribals used a plant to enhance breast milk. Another leaf, in merely four days, brought back to normal a testicle swollen to twice its size. The latex of the same plant applied on the skin could draw out a thorn from deep within.

These seemingly miraculous cures held the young man in thrall. But the tribals used their resources with practised ease, drawing on a science that had been handed down over generations.

A decade later, the young man stepped back into the city, eager to build a bridge between the Karjat tribals and indigenous people like them and the rest of modern India which was being taught to forget that they existed.

After knocking on several doors, he set up the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) with the help of Sam Pitroda, innovative telecom engineer and intrepid advisor to Rajiv Gandhi.

FRLHT's mandate was to show that medical care had many manifestations. It included the folk traditions of the tribals and the documented wisdom of Ayurveda as much as it did the allopathy on which city people relied. The Karjat tribals had shown him that there was a science in what they practised and that it grew out of their cultural identity.

Last month, now all of 52 years of age, Darshan Shankar flew to New York to receive the Columbia University Award for the revitalisation of Indian medical heritage. His achievements include creating an awareness of the role medicinal plants play in medical care, the relevance of folk systems of medicine and the need to respect Ayurveda as a science in its own right.

Earlier awards have included the Borlaugh for conservation of medicinal plants and the Equator Initiative Prize of the United Nations for conservation of medicinal plants with community participation.

Darshan Shankar's FRLHT can take credit for the setting up of a board for medicinal plants by the Government of India. It has encouraged forest departments to take up in situ conservation of medicinal plants. Beginning in the southern states, this is now a nationwide interest. Thanks to FRLHT's efforts, 54 gene banks are in existence and more are coming up.

FRLHT has also played an important role in identifying medicinal plants and short-listing 200 species of plants as being under threat of extinction.

But perhaps most difficult of all has been FRLHT's effort to show that public health care has to include folk and traditional systems of medicine for it to be effective, innovative and affordable.

Modern medicine meets the primary health care needs of just 30 per cent of the Indian population, says Shankar. For the rest, there are traditional healers, bonesetters and midwives. It is unlikely that they can ever be adequately replaced. Yet, they have begun to vanish because policy makers do not give them the importance they deserve.

"I discovered that the Karjat tribals knew the uses of over 400 plants, animals, birds and reptiles. The people who had access to and used this kind of knowledge were ordinary householders as well as more specialised village healers," says Shankar.

"Often, households knew of home remedies for managing more than 30 common health conditions. Every village had a birth attendant (called *suen*) and at least one other socially recognised healer whom the villagers called *vaidu* (healer). There were *vaidus* who specialised in treating snakebites, others specialised in treating broken bones, and there were those who treated veterinary problems. None of the *vaidus* depended on healing for their livelihood. They had other occupations and healing was only a social service."

This exposure both "inspired and angered" him. "I felt inspired by the decentralised nature of folk health knowledge. Rural India already appeared to have the futuristic ideal of 'health in your own hands' that social thinkers dream of," he says. But it angered him

that little was being done to keep this tradition alive.

Ironically, the neglect of traditional health systems takes place simultaneously with a rapid increase in the market for herbal remedies and cosmetics. Tribals the world over have kept the pharmaceutical industry in big money. At least 119 pure chemical substances extracted from about 90 higher plants are used in medicines. More than 40 per cent of prescriptions in America depend on natural sources. The market in herbal medicine has risen to \$ 43 billion annually worldwide. Blood pressure lowering formulations came from the Indian snakeroot, *Rauvolfia serpentina*.

Patents have been sought for the use of *jar amla* or *Phyllanthus niruri* as a cure for jaundice and viral hepatitis B. *Haldi* or turmeric is being used as a healer of wounds and an anti-inflammatory agent. *Amla* or *Phyllanthus emblica* is found to be useful in the



Now there is a need for interpreting traditional standards using modern tools. FRLHT says that no other lab in India working on traditional medicine has sufficient access to reliable traditional knowledge

treatment of flu, tuberculosis and perhaps even AIDS. *Neem* or *Azadirachta indica* has an ever-growing demand as a biopesticide, a contraceptive and much more. Herbal remedies are found to be effective against diabetes and cholesterol.

The efficacy of these plants is now being endorsed by modern science. But they were nurtured by communities and their medicinal uses were kept alive through local traditions. It is because of this that scientists who go scouting for plants also carry away local knowledge with them. It is not enough to collect samples at random and subject them to tests in a laboratory. Much depends on what people who nurture a plant and

An Ayurveda hospital

IT will demonstrate, using modern parameters, the efficacy of Ayurvedic health care management for prevention, promotion and cure. A wellness center will focus on preventive cardiology, diabetes and anti-aging. It will also demonstrate the applications of Ayurvedic therapies related to Panchakarma (the five purificatory procedures), Rasayana (the rejuvenating procedures) and Din and Ritu Charya (lifestyle, adaptations).

Documenting community health practices

HOUSEHOLD practices are an important aspect of the Indian medical heritage. Women play a crucial part in this

FRLHT into the future

process. Ten year-research agreements are planned with community health organisations to document practices nationwide.

Tools to interpret traditional knowledge

MOST laboratories have equipment but lack traditional knowledge. Seed funds will be used to establish reliable databases on traditional quality standards based upon *desh-vichar*, *dravya guna shastra* and *bhaisaj kalpana*.

Development of computerised databases

FRLHT in the last ten years has been

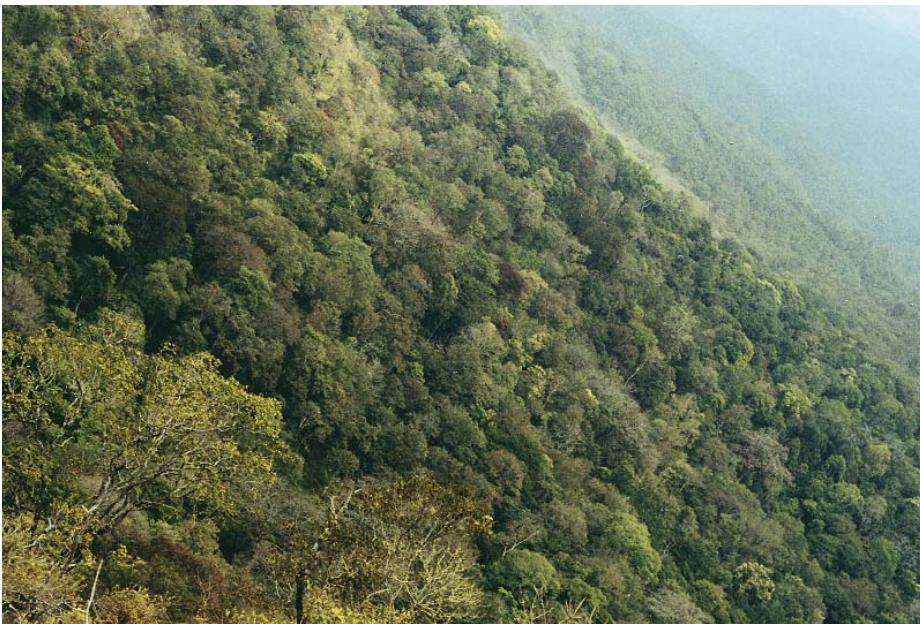
documenting and developing databases on the materia medica of Indian systems of medicine. Medicinal Plant databases have been already initiated on Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and Homeopathy. In the coming years, work will be done on diagnostics and other speciality areas like panchakarma and rasayana, as these fields are critical for the effective application of Ayurveda and Siddha.

Women's self-help groups

AROUND one million local healers and several million ordinary housewives, are carriers of oral health traditions. Revitalisation of these traditions holds

the key to the health security of millions of people. At present FRLHT has helped to initiate the formation of taluk level associations of native healers in the state of Karnataka. Since 1994, FRLHT has also been honoring via the "Natti Vaidya Ratnam award", outstanding local healers of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

FRLHT along with its reputed NGO partners has helped in the formation of women's self-help groups in southern India. The SHGs are the carriers of home-remedies. At present around 1000 self-groups are working in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. FRLHT has also encouraged SHGs to promote the establishment of kitchen herbal gardens.



The Western Ghats rich in biodiversity

share its habitat have to say about its uses.

Just how much can be learnt from tribals emerges from an India-wide ethnobotanical survey. It recorded the use of over 9500 species of wild plants by tribals for food, medicine, clothing and cosmetics. Of these only 4000 species are known to the scientific world.

In addition to folk medicine, Ayurveda, which is codified traditional medical knowledge, has some 50,000 formulations. It has treatises on therapies, surgery, the mind-body relationship, diagnostic methods and so on. There is much to be found in Siddha and Unani as well.

But even as herbal treatments grow as an urban fad, there seems little willingness to nurture the sources from which they come. The result is that folk knowledge no longer finds new torchbearers and in the codified streams few want to step in as career physicians.

Indian medical manuscripts are scattered in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Mongolia, China and Thailand, as well as in the libraries of Western Europe and the USA. Successive Indian governments have been wholly unmindful of the country's medical heritage. There has been no private effort either to put this wealth of knowledge together and treat it as a national treasure trove.

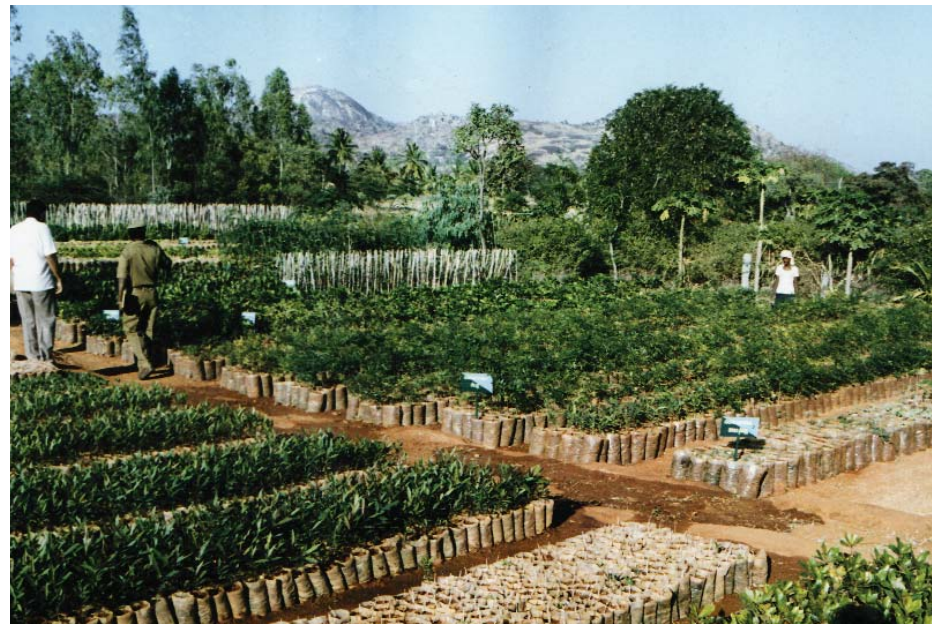
Shankar says: "It is estimated that there are over one million medical and non-medical manuscripts in all Indian languages in collections all over the world. However, there is no estimate regarding the number of manuscripts in the area of medicine. The Tamil University in Tanjore carried out a preliminary analysis of all Tamil manuscripts in public collections in India and other parts of the world, and their work shows that there are a total of 24,000 extant Tamil manuscripts. Of these, 4,000 are on medicine. In this context, we must bear in mind that these are in addition to the substantial number of manuscripts that exist outside of public collections, in the families of practitioners."

At the core of the problem is an unwillingness to see folk and traditional medicine as science with its own cultural origins. This is because ours is a world dominated by western biomedicine. Anything that does not conform to its parameters gets categorised as non-science.

Traditional remedies find acceptance only when they pass validation in terms of western science. This is merely a fraction of the recognition they deserve and it seems to do more harm than good because it puts a question mark on the system which kept a remedy in currency over generations. Then again, the search in a laboratory for the active principles of a plant may result in a replicable molecule, but it is not the way formulations are put together in traditional therapy.

Both Ayurveda and folk medicine depend on a plant being picked at a certain time, in a certain place and consumed either whole or in combinations with other herbs.

Phytochemists and pharmacologists who get to know the chemistry of a plant and how an active compound performs invariably have no understanding of community practices. It is the community, which keeps the plant in currency and shapes its use through various practices. A laboratory is therefore no substitute for a kitchen garden or natural habitat where plants may compete against each other and draw on soil, water and air to acquire their distinctive properties.



Nurseries have helped keep species alive

"The tribals do not just use active compounds -- they used flowers, fruits, bark, root, latex and gum, either in combination or in their entirety," says Shankar. "Chemists and pharmacologists unfortunately do not know anything of the biological activity of the entire plant, only of certain chemicals derived from it. The scientists I approached worked in reputed institutions. However, they could not help. They needed huge funds and several years of research to carry out systematic studies."

By contrast, Shankar was impressed by Ayurvedic physicians he met in his early years of discovery. They knew the materials the tribals had used and had books on indigenous pharmacology (Dravya Guna Sastra) in which the materials had been studied using 10 to 15 different parameters. They could therefore confirm the validity of tribal treatments.

At times, they could suggest modifications to the local practice, or even substitute plants in cases where the original plant was not available. These doctors knew the systemic effect of plants, their metabolic effects at different stages of ingestion, and their action on body tissues, organs, etc. They also knew the side effects and contraindications as well as how to cancel them by adding other natural substances to balance, synergise or improve their assimilation.

Shankar tells the fascinating story of an eminent Ayurvedic physician from Pune. He was publicly felicitated for curing a case of leukaemia: the patient, who had been given a few weeks to live, had survived without remission for five years and was still healthy.

While speaking at the felicitation, the physician declared:

"Ayurveda does not have a term equivalent to 'cancer' and there is no mention of a condition called leukaemia. I did not bother to study the case sheets and the diagnosis from the cancer hospital that my patient presented to me for scrutiny because I have not studied biochemistry and therefore do not understand the subject. I examined the patient afresh and diagnosed his condition using Ayurvedic principles. The patient's status had to be classified under a provisional diagnosis that was not described in the diagnostic literature of Ayurveda. (Ayurvedic science does enable physicians to make

provisional diagnoses of new health conditions that have not been previously described). I then designed a treatment to suit my diagnosis. The patient was thus cured."

The physician added: "I do not, however, claim to be able to cure cancer. But I do claim that I have the capacity and willingness to look at any new health condition for, with the help of Ayurvedic science, a physician may be able to diagnose and treat, and perhaps even cure the disease."

Shankar strives to make FRLHT a bridge between systems so that a better understanding can lead to cultural pluralism and improve understanding of the science that goes with tradition.

"In an industrial age or in an age of consumerism, standardisation is essential. I believe, however, that standards for traditional medicines should be created based upon traditional knowledge," says Shankar.

Ayurveda has standards of its own for plant identity, collection time (season, place, maturity, time of the day or night), processing techniques and for finished products. But Ayurveda leaves it to competent physicians with integrity to enforce these standards.

These physicians also function in an individual capacity, taking responsibility for what



Modern medicine meets the primary health care needs of just 30 per cent of the Indian population. For the rest, there are traditional healers, bonesetters and midwives. They can not be replaced.



FRLHT has ceaselessly promoted medicinal plants

they personally prescribe. Ayurveda did not rely on external tools because it did not intend to serve modern markets in huge volumes.

Now there is a need for interpreting traditional standards using modern tools. "To my knowledge no other lab in India working on traditional medicine has sufficient access to reliable traditional knowledge and therefore the standards that they set even if they appear to be neat because they are expressed in measurable units, are in fact arbitrary," declares Shankar.

Yet another challenge is to create a bridge between modern diagnosis and traditional treatment. Is such a bridge possible at all when there are two entirely different worldviews involved? Shankar thinks a functional bridge is possible.

"A functional bridge is not a perfect bridge for communication," he explains. "It is a makeshift arrangement that can serve the limited but important purpose of establishing the functional credibility and efficacy of Ayurveda. The how and why of Ayurveda will not be understood on this bridge, but the bridge can establish that Ayurveda works. A one to one correlation between Ayurvedic principles, concepts and categories is perhaps impossible to achieve because of the different epistemological frameworks on which Ayurveda and modern medicine are based."

A patient put on this bridge will undergo both traditional diagnosis and modern diagnosis separately. Now the two diagnoses could well be different because they are



Bridging the gap between the modern and traditional

done on two different sets of premises. But the treatment given to the patient will be based on the traditional diagnosis. Modern medical systems will be used to keep a record of the condition of the patient.

If the patient was diagnosed as suffering from malaria or jaundice, a diagnosis based on modern parameters, and after the treatment was declared under modern parameters to be cured, it would be established that the traditional system works.

"Thus we call this kind of collaboration a functional bridge, because whereas it does not explain or cover all the aspects of traditional management, it is sufficient to establish credibility," says Shankar.

Shankar's plans for an Ayurveda hospital in Bangalore will be directed primarily at establishing this bridge. Dr G. Gangadharan, a reputed Ayurveda physician who was till now with the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy in Coimbatore has joined him to set up the hospital.

The hospital will have 100 beds and deal with diabetes, skin diseases, cardiac disorders, neurological diseases and musculo-skeletal diseases. The hospital will have modern diagnostic facilities to systematically document all its cases.

The hospital will have an important training function as this is essential for bringing Ayurveda into mainstream modern medical care. Professionals can then go back to their institutions equipped to implement validated traditional health management schemes in addition to what they already practice.

The meaning of tradition

The health traditions of a community must be distinguished from their other health practices. There may be several current health practices in a community, like using an aspirin tablet for a headache, which are not a part of tradition. There are two criteria for calling a practice a tradition. First, traditions are those practices which are self-perpetuating. They are practices that are transmitted without the intervention of any agency or institution. Furthermore they are practices that have been passed down generations for at least one century and continue to be passed down today. Traditions may be purely oral or written.

What is most fascinating about local health traditions is their self-sustaining nature. They sustain in millions of homes and thousands of villages, towns and cities without the aid of any institution to propel them and without any external source of funding. They evolve, adapt and modify with time. They embody knowledge of the human physiology and anatomy and of the mind, of food and nutrition, of pharmacological properties of plants, animals, metals and minerals.

One significant feature of the carriers of the folk traditions is that the healers do not undertake medical service as a full-time vocation. The healer may be a farmer, or a labourer, a barber, or a shopkeeper, a blacksmith, or a shepherd or even a wandering monk. The medical service

although not free of charge is non-commercial and the healer does not depend on this service for a living. The community (patient) pays the healer for his services as per the local cultural norms.

EXAMPLES OF TRADITIONS

There are outstanding instances of the purely oral traditions. They are seen both at the household and community level. Millions of homes have 'knowledge' of region specific home remedies and of 'health' diets, by way of tradition.

To give a common example, in south India every household knows and had known for more than a century the use of the plant *Phyllanthus amarus* for treatment of Hepatitis (Kamala). People are now beginning to revalue this tradition because a few years ago an American Nobel Prize winner sought and obtained a patent on the application of this plant for treatment of viral hepatitis B and C.

In northern India there is a traditionally consumed dish which constitutes potatoes (aloo in Hindi) and methi (botanical name: *Trigonella foenum-graecum*). This dish traditionally prepared by thousands of households is referred to as methi aloo and not as aloo methi, to stress that there should be a higher proportion of methi in the aloo. The logic of this proportion is that methi by its hot nature balances the wind-producing effects of the potatoes. This example also points to the dynamic and

adapting nature of LHTs. Potato as is known is exotic to India and is introduced into the country by the Portuguese only around the sixteenth century. The material was studied and assessed by Ayurvedic physicians and found to be wind-producing, therefore it was advised to be eaten in combination with balancing materials like methi, jeera (*Cuminum cyminum*) and hing (*Serula asafetida*) etc.

Another example of a health food tradition can be found in the preparation of the well known and highly nutritious south Indian dish called Idli. This is a steamed cake of rice and lentils. The lentil used in Idli is masah (*Vigna mungo*). This material though very rich in protein (Mams-varadhak) is also hot and acidic (ushna and pith karak). In north India, it is only eaten in winter because if it were eaten regularly in summer, it would cause side effects of hyperacidity and flatulence. The south Indians however have overcome this problem of masah by a brilliant combination of masah and rice in a certain proportion (1:3) and the dish is prepared as a steamed cake from a fermented dough. In this form it eliminates the side effects of masah and can be eaten throughout the year. It has a healthy balance of protein, carbohydrates and vitamins. Idli is easy to digest and can be eaten by old, young and even infants. This is an ideal health food. The preparation of this health food is part of health tradition known and practiced by millions.

'Modern medicine is less than half the answer'

DARSHAN Shankar spoke to *Civil Society* on the relevance of traditional medicine in delivering public health care, the role played by the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) in protecting medicinal plants and his plans for an Ayurveda hospital in Bangalore.

What is the evidence that people want traditional medicine?

In urban areas all over the world there is a growing demand for what is being termed as complementary and alternative medicine. This is evident from numerous behavioural studies.

On the other hand, in rural areas there is a great deal of erosion of faith in traditional medicine. It is my considered view that this erosion is on account of economic and cultural causes and not due to the ineffectiveness of traditional medicine. In a rural household if a guest is welcomed with a slightly toxic Coca-Cola instead of coconut water or kokum juice, this behaviour is due to the economic power of Coca-Cola rather than the ineffectiveness of the healthy coconut water.

But the fact is that modern medicine meets the primary health needs of only 30 per cent of the population. A health care system, therefore, has to be structured to combine both the traditional and modern.

Medicine is invariably seen in terms of western science. Such uniformity narrows down the options and alternatives available to people. It is important to understand that more than one medical system exists with its own cultural origins. These systems are creative and dynamic. From them we can derive sustainable public health solutions. Ayurveda is one such system.

There are serious problems of standardisation and quality with regard to traditional medicines. How should these be addressed? What is the validation that you do at the FRLHT laboratory?

In an age of consumerism, standardisation is essential. I believe however that standards for traditional medicines should be based on traditional knowledge.

In Ayurvedic literature there are detailed and carefully worked out standards for plant identity, collection time (season, place, maturity, time of the day or night etc.) processing techniques and for finished products. These standards, however, can only be assessed by sincere and competent traditional physicians. No external tools were devised to assess the standards. Adherence to standards was dependent on the integrity of physicians.

Today we need to use external tools so that assessment of standards can then be made more conveniently anywhere.

The challenge is to interpret the traditional standards using modern tools. This is what the FRLHT lab does.

To my knowledge no other lab in India working on traditional medicine has sufficient access to reliable traditional knowledge and therefore the standards that they set even if they appear to be neat because they are expressed in measurable units, are in fact arbitrary.

What is the status of medicinal plants in India? What do we know about what is available and what is vanishing and so on?

It is estimated that there are 8000 species of medicinal plants in India. Before 1993 no one spoke about or did anything to conserve wild populations, which form the gene pool of these species. FRLHT was the first organisation to flag the need for conserving

the gene pool in its natural habitat. It suggested the bold but cost-effective idea of establishing a nation-wide network of forest gene banks (200 - 500 ha size each) across the different vegetation types and altitude range in every state. Today, in peninsular India, 54 forest gene banks have been established by forest departments with technical support from FRLHT. The MoEF and the Planning Commission have accepted this strategy for conservation in the country's 10th Five-year plan.

You seem to be trying to build a bridge between modern diagnostics and traditional therapy. Is this possible? Aren't we looking at two completely different systems?

A functional bridge is possible between modern diagnosis and traditional treatment. A functional bridge is not a perfect bridge for communication, it is a makeshift arrangement, that can serve the limited but important purpose of establishing the functional credibility and efficacy of Ayurveda. The hows and whys of Ayurveda will not

be understood on this bridge, but the bridge can establish that Ayurveda works. A one to one correlation between Ayurvedic principles, concepts and categories is perhaps impossible to achieve because of the different epistemological frameworks on which Ayurveda and modern medicine are based.

Let me explain how this functional bridge would work.

A patient will undergo both traditional diagnosis and modern diagnosis separately. The two diagnoses may be different because of their different frameworks of medical analysis. The treatment to the patient will be based on the traditional diagnosis. The modern diagnosis will be used to record the condition of the patient before, during and after treatment.

The conclusion in this scheme would say that X patient who was diagnosed before treatment on modern parameters as say a case of malaria (*falciparum*), was evaluated after treatment as being without any parasites and therefore declared cured through treatment. Thus one could conclude that traditional treatment works on malaria.

Without however the intervention of modern diagnostics the patient may have got cured of a malaria, but it would not be possible to establish this fact.

Thus we call this kind of collaboration a functional bridge, because whereas it does not explain or cover all the aspects of traditional management, it is sufficient to

establish credibility.

Tells us about your plans for an Ayurveda hospital.

It is intended, as a strategic and pioneering step, to establish a 100 bed Ayurveda Wellness Centre with a research oriented hospital, which will demonstrate, using modern parameters the efficacy of Ayurvedic health care management for prevention, promotion and cure.

In preventive health care, the wellness centre will focus on preventive cardiology, diabetes and anti-ageing. It will also demonstrate the applications of Ayurvedic therapies related to Panchakarma (the five purificatory procedures), Rasayana (the rejuvenating procedures) and Din and Ritu Charya (life style, adaptations).

In promotive health, the wellness centre will focus on maternity care, management of post-menopause, yoga and Kalaripayattu (traditional martial arts).

The hospital on the curative side will focus on diabetes mellitus, skin diseases, cardiac disorders, neurological diseases and musculo skeletal diseases. The hospital will be equipped with all the modern diagnostic facilities to systematically document all its cases.



'It is estimated that there are more than 8000 species of medicinal and useful plants in India. Before 1993 no one spoke about or did anything about conserving wild populations, which form the gene pool of these species. FRLHT was the first organisation to flag the need for conserving the gene pool in its natural habitat.'

INSIDE VIEW

Why keep out donors

By Anil Singh

THE Government of India (GOI) has decided to say good-bye to bilateral aid donors except the US, UK, Japan, the EU, Germany and Russia. The GOI says most of India's problems can be tackled with its internal resources. Is this really true?

Big players do matter and therefore most development programmes are already 'beholden' to the World Bank, the European Union, the Asian Development Bank, DFID and Japan. But smaller players have been concentrating on important development issues.

These include social and economic empowerment, communal harmony and human rights. These very issues were creating problems for the government. If this is not a fact, then why is the government setting conditions on bilateral donors?

Recent guidelines suggest that a donor will have to submit a list of NGOs whom they want to support for approval to the Department of Economic Affairs. Only organisations registered under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) of the Home Ministry will be considered. The donors will have to tell the government, twice a year, how the NGOs utilised their funds.

Many questions emerge from this decision. How will the government handle poverty in a country which constitutes half of the poor in Asia and around one-fourth in the world? What will be the fate of several social development schemes run by state governments once bilateral donors withdraw? Why has the Finance Minister taken this decision unilaterally?

How will the GOI meet the demands of the Planning Commission and the state governments? The 10th Five Year Plan expressed serious concerns about the paucity of resources and relied on external non-debt capital inflows to finance the growth rate. The Planning Commission advocated greater inflows of aid, but the Finance ministry moves in the opposite direction. Many states cannot pay the salaries of their staff and are using development funds instead. Can the GOI meet state specific demands?

For many, this policy decision signals that India is becoming a new economic power and deserves a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. Perhaps, this is why GOI's decision will not affect the US, Russia, UK, and Germany. But are we sacrificing our relationship with developing countries like the G-21 or G-24, to get approval from the 'big players'? They have not generally supported India, apart from Russia. Is it good for India to lose time-tested friends from developing countries?

Concerned citizens should put pressure on GOI to reverse this policy decision and question why the government repeatedly tries to bypass Parliament while taking policy decisions.

Anil Singh is Executive Secretary, Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI), a network of 2000 voluntary organisations.

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THREE WAYS TO CLEAN UP ELECTIONS

By Jayaprakash Narayan

THE health of a democracy depends on the choice of representatives and leaders, which is directly linked to the way political parties function and elections are conducted. While we have outstanding men and women in public life, a flawed electoral process is alienating public-spirited citizens from the political and electoral arena

In a well-functioning democracy, the political process ought to find answers to governance. Every election holds a promise for peaceful change. People in India have been voting for change time and again. But the political process is locked in a vicious cycle and has become part of the problem.

Some recent developments give us a sense of rapid change and offer hope that our governance system is on the verge of major transformation. Some of the changes on the anvil, for instance, like the political funding reform, are potentially far-reaching, and would be regarded as revolutionary in any democracy. Given the complexity of our crisis, such reforms are milestones, but do not really change the nature of our troubled politics. We need to pursue systemic reforms changing the nature of elections and process of power. In my considered judgment, three such reforms required.

1. Mixed Compensatory Proportional Representation

The time is ripe in India for a more-inclusive, democratic and fair representation through the Proportional Representation (PR) system. However, certain checks and safeguards are necessary to ensure stability and continuity. Apart from a reasonable threshold level of votes (say 10%) for qualifying for allocation of seats, the system should be designed to suit our requirements, and parties should be strictly monitored and regulated.

One criticism of the PR system is that the link between the member and his constituency is snapped. We should therefore explore the option of a mixed system in which the constituency-based First Past The Post (FPTP) system coexists with the PR system. Germany is the best example. The allocation of the number of seats for each party is decided in proportion to the total number of votes obtained by it nationally. There are two votes for each elector, one to elect the constituency member through FPTP system, and the other the party vote. Half the seats are filled by FPTP system. The party vote determines the proportion of vote for the party and the distribution of total seats nationally. All the members elected in the local constituencies by FPTP system are retained. The party seats are allocated according to a pre-determined party list. The choice of candidates on the list and their ranking should be democratic and by secret ballot by the elected party delegates in the electoral district.

Out of the 47 functioning democracies, 37 adopt the PR system. Only 10 coun-

tries - Britain and nine of its former colonies - follow the FPTP system. Australia and New Zealand, both former British colonies, have given up FPTP. Even in Britain, only elections to the House of Commons are based on FPTP. Members of the European Parliament in Britain, and regional parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are elected based on the PR system.

2. Direct Election of Head of Government

The head of government at the state level should be directly elected by the people, and h/she will form the cabinet, drawing members from outside the legislature. This will enable a clear separation of powers between the executive and legis-

lature and the elected head of government will no longer be required to have a legislative majority to govern. The legislature

could be strengthened by giving more oversight powers to legislative committees.

The advantages of direct election at the state-level are : a) Elections will be much cleaner, since no one can buy a whole state electorate; b) The image and agenda of the leadership will determine the electoral outcome; c) With the separation of powers, there will be no incentive to overspend for legislative office; d) As government will have a fixed term, honesty and political survival will be compatible; e) At the state level, there will be no fear of authoritarianism as the Union, Election Commission, Supreme Court etc will act as checks against abuse of authority.

3. Political Party regulation by law

As opposed to the current scenario, all political parties should be regulated by a comprehensive law. Political party regulation should ensure : a) Free and open membership with no arbitrary expulsions; b) Democratic, regular, free, secret ballot for leadership election; and opportunity to challenge and unseat leadership through formal procedures with no risk of being penalized ; c) Democratic choice of party candidates for elective office by members or their elected delegates ; d) Full transparency in funding and utilization of resources.

These are minimal changes to restore health and sanity to our democracy. Both PR and political party regulation can be implemented by changes in law. Only separation of powers in states and local governments requires a constitutional amendment. These are by no means sufficient to resolve our crisis. Effective decentralization of power, judicial reforms to ensure speedy justice, and instruments of accountability are the vital requirements to ensure citizen-centred, competent, honest governance. But political reforms are the key to rejuvenate our republic. While the politician is no more guilty than other players, the responsibility to resolve our crisis rests squarely with the politicians.

The author, is the National Coordinator of LOK SATTVA and the National Campaign for Electoral Reforms.
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DEBATE

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The system has to change for politicians to perform

Slum girl ignites flame of change

Prateep Ungsongthan started schools to give dignity to children

Barun Roy

If you ask Prateep Ungsongtham what's the best way to improve the lot of the poor, her answer is simple: Give them dignity. And what better way to give the poor dignity than to give them education?

She knows because she was one of them. She was born and raised in Bangkok's Klong Toey slum and saw what happened to children who didn't go to school. They begged in the street, or slaved in shops and factories, or became drifters, criminals, and prostitutes.

In 1968, came the awakening she hasn't forgotten. She was just 16, working during the day in a fireworks factory and on odd jobs at Bangkok port to pay her way through night school. One day she was eating at a market stall when a child came up to her and asked for money. Remembering her own background - her father was an odd-jobber and her mother a cook - she gave. A little later, another child walked up and asked for the remnants of food on her plate. Again, she gave.

But as the child lapped up the food hungrily, she felt immensely sad, she later said. Why, she asked herself, should these children suffer such a fate when education could give them self-respect and transform their lives? She knew education could change lives. That's why she was so desperate about her own schooling. Couldn't something be done, she thought, to give these children a chance?

That was the beginning.

She went home and told her parents she wanted to start a school for slum children. It didn't matter they were poor. She'd hold school right there in their little home. It didn't matter she had no money to buy tables, chairs and books. The children would sit on the floor and she would ask people to help. Her parents were happy. Her neighbours were glad to send their children since, at that time, there were no schools in Klong Toey.

Prateep taught them for free. Slowly, word spread, her small room filled up, people started paying whatever and whenever they could, and Klong Toey was on its way to a revolution. Never before had anybody thought that children who lived in slums were worth educating.

To show everybody that she meant business, Prateep got herself trained as a teacher. The authorities finally came round to recognizing her school. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration took over its management

to lend her a helping hand. And when the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT), on whose land Klong Toey stood, threatened to evict part of the slum community, along with the school, the nation's media stood by Prateep. PAT, eventually, agreed to give her an alternative site in the neighbourhood.

The victory hurtled Prateep, then only 24, into national attention. Two years later, in 1978, the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation in Manila honoured her with the prestigious Magsaysay Award for public service. In 1980, she became the first Asian to receive the John D. Rockefeller Youth Award for Outstanding Contribution to Mankind.

Today, Prateep's school has been replicated in slums all over Bangkok, with the government now playing an active role. Many of these schools provide midday meals to make children stay in class. It's not rare nowadays to see slum children in secondary and vocational schools, or even in universities.

Prateep has given Bangkok's slum communities the one thing they never had before: self-respect. It was her crusade, under the banner of the Duang Prateep Foundation (DPF), created with her Magsaysay Award money, that finally earned slum dwellers official recognition - birth certificates and house registrations, which enable them to get ID cards and allow them to go to state schools or get jobs.

Duang Prateep means "flame of hope" in Thai. The foundation negotiates compensation if slum communities are threatened with eviction. It gets funding agencies to provide loans if a slum dweller wants to buy land or build a house. It holds seminars, workshops and training sessions where slum dwellers learn of opportunities and develop contacts with the outside world. It gets sponsors to assist schools for poor children throughout the country. And it runs a credit union that has given slum families greater financial freedom to manage their own affairs.

Established in 1994 as a slum dwellers' bank, the Klong Toey Cooperative for Community Service has about 1,200 members and holds over 10 million bahts in deposit. Each month, members must deposit at least 50 bahts. In return, they can borrow up to 3,000 bahts for emergencies and up to 100,000 bahts to start a business or improve their homes.

Most of DPF's staff are slum dwellers and know exactly where the shoe pinches. They work closely with area committees to influence political leaders. Over the years, DPF has evolved as Thailand's first comprehensive development and resource centre for slum communities and one of its most effective agents of change. Prateep influences the Prime Minister's urban policy and is a member of the Parliamentary Advisory Committee on Education for the Poor. Three years ago, she won a seat in Thailand's first ever elected Senate, strengthening her position.

Since 1988, DPF has been at the forefront of Thailand's campaign against AIDS. It has enlisted some 300 housewives as volunteers to assist its four AIDS staff. An army of motorcycle-taxi drivers has been recruited. They wear DPF-supplied vests with anti-AIDS slogans

printed on the back and talk to passengers about AIDS whenever they have a chance. They also distribute condoms to whoever wants them.

But it's the foundation's "New Life" project for slum dwellers that has been drawing attention. The project gives children at risk from drugs, exploitation, abuse and crime an environment where they can pick up new skills and habits.

DPF has leased 35 hectares of farmland in the southern province of Chumphon, some 600 kilometres south of Bangkok and 16 hectares in Kanchanaburi to the west, where the children stay as a sheltered community long enough to overcome their old ways. They work as local farmhands, go to local schools, take vocational training, and sell their products at local markets to earn money and learn the value of saving.

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NGOs team up to keep Europe GM free

Lim Li Ching

THE second European Social Forum met in Paris from 12-15 November and discussed strategies to keep Europe GM free.

Efforts by local authorities to establish GM-free zones have met with difficulties. Upper Austria's attempt to declare itself GM-free in September 2003 was rejected by the European Commission (EC), on grounds that no new scientific evidence had emerged to support a ban. The Upper Austrian parliament will appeal this decision.

Unfazed, Friends of the Earth is spearheading a campaign on GM-free zones. Activists are lobbying local authorities and using Article 19 which permits GM free areas, provided authorities specify conditions of consent including the protection of particular ecosystems, environments or geographical areas. To date, more than 20 local authorities in the UK have adopted GM-free policies.

Velt - the federation of ecological living and producing - launched its 'GMO-free communities' campaign in Belgium last year. It has been urging all 308 Flemish local authorities to declare their territories GM-free. The Federal Government has assured Velt that the opinion of local communities will be taken into account. Public debates on GM have taken place in villages and cities, for the first time.

CCC-OGM, consisting of fifteen French NGOs, wants its government to initiate a public debate on GM before any political decision is made. It recommends using citizens'

conferences to stimulate parliamentary debate. The collective hopes to mobilise European partners to organise similar debates throughout Europe.

Iza Kruszczyńska from Clean Production Action and the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, ANPED talked about the situation in Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. The US government threatened to complain to the WTO, when Croatia attempted to ban production of GMOs and restrict import. New legislation in the country requires authorisation and labelling for all GM food and feed placed on the market, and banning the release of GMOs in protected areas, their buffer zones, organic farming areas and in regions for eco-tourism.

Serbia and Montenegro has a policy of keeping its agriculture GM-free but its GM-free status is threatened by smuggling of GM soybeans, field trials and US food aid donations to Kosovo. The threat of contamination is real, as Romania and Bulgaria grow GM crops commercially. The chances for successful GM-free initiatives in pro-US countries - Poland and Czech Republic - are slim, for this is where the biotech industry has most influence. NGOs there are valiantly struggling to stop the commercialisation of GM crops.

According to Skelzen Marku from the Centre for Rural Studies 24 NGOs had sent a letter to the Albanian Parliament demanding a 5-year moratorium on GMOs. The proposal was postponed due to resignations within the Socialist government.

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Sick food in a sanitised market

ONE of the many shocks that an Indian was bound to perceive on his first encounter with Europe and America as I did, was the abundance of food. That was truer a generation ago than it is today - thanks to the white, green and other revolutions that have unfolded in India. Since food addresses a basic need we can only ignore it at our peril. Economic trends for the less developed nations become increasingly predictable as the intertwined interests of global companies insidiously creep into our lives without our knowledge.

Food is increasingly becoming the source of many ills. We can spend light years debating the whys of this issue but do we have the time? The short answer to its cause is perennial greed - that ever-present nemesis beguiling us with individual promises only to betray us with collective destruction.

Providers of food have always cut corners and substituted cheap alternatives, but the first great age of food adulteration came with the industrial revolution. Urbanised populations, not only required new sources but were also ignorant of how their food was made. In earlier communities the neighbourhood butcher or baker might have been restrained by the knowledge that any shortcuts he chose could poison his neighbours and friends. Now, he can hide in the anonymity that urbanization - and even more, globalisation, provides him.

In early autumn a BBC reporter approached my wife and me on Les Champs Elysées to ask our views on José Bové just after he was arrested for destroying a GM farm in France. My wife, generally a mild apolitical person, sprang to respond, surprising me with the eloquence of her argument. She said that we moved to France from the USA after her having being there for 14 years, because she wanted to protect her children from the food one was forced to eat. "I had to travel more than 20 miles to buy organic milk at thrice the price," she added. "I was under the impression that I was now back to the safety of my wonderful French food standards, only to realise that the same madness is about to follow me here. This man, José Bové is simply making us aware of what is happening."

Earlier in the year, scandals were breaking out in

the UK about practises in the European meat industry that were believed to exist only in America. Large food processors, it turns out, had been adulterating chicken and other meats with beef and pig waste for years. They were taking the chicken skin off the outside of the bird, hydrolysing it and injecting it back on the inside. This is to pump the meat full of water and make

vast profits at the expense of the consumers.

Of greater concern is the collusion between the industry and its supposed regulators. The very people in whom we have placed our trust are the ones who are conniving with the "enemy". This is done by doling out fuzzy logic and Euro-speak by the shipload. They inundate you with bureaucratic

officialese, which translates into "anything goes as long as it is labelled", the same logic the US food industry had been using. A PhD in nutritional science is required to accurately decipher one of those labels, they say. Even if they label this chicken for the wholesalers, you and I are never going to see these labels. When this dangerous glob of meat, water and waste ends up in my takeaway or restaurant meal, or in our children's lunchboxes, or in our packaged meals, we will not see the label, will we?

At the "front end" of this "supply chain process" are sanitized supermarkets designed by an army of psychology graduates. Soothing music, aesthetic layout, attractive packaging in charming colours and shapes that set your taste buds on fire, and you walk out laden with more food than your Bangladeshi counterpart would buy in a whole season. Nutritionally illiterate, the average consumer does not realise that he has just bought food that will probably do more long term damage to his health than he can ever imagine.

As the snare of this global pestilence slowly encircles us, we have no retreat, not among the Pennsylvania Dutch living in their 17th Century isolation in the USA, nor in the quaint boucheries in Versailles, where one is equally liable to find succulent antibiotic tainted shrimps that have made their way from far away Vietnam or Cambodia. Is it already too late or are we going to wake up and make it to the other side of the looking glass, in time for dinner?

LETTER FROM EUROPE



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Women delegates protest Loya Jirga

WOMEN delegates at Afghanistan's Loya Jirga or grand council, are protesting that their male colleagues are trying to shut them out of leadership positions and that the men treat the women like second-class citizens.

The Loya Jirga was called to debate Afghanistan's draft constitution including women's rights and the role Islam will play in the country's future. On December 15, delegates voted to fill two deputy chair seats. Sixteen delegates ran for the deputy posts including three women. One was won by Mirwais Yasini, the Director of the Counter Narcotics Department and another man was elected to the second deputy seat. The defeat of all three women candidates left women outraged. Chairman

Mujaddedi then created a third deputy chair position and selected Safia Siddiqui, the former Director of Planning and Foreign Relations in Afghanistan's Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Women's rights and human rights advocates are worried that the limited rights guarantees in the current draft of the constitution may be negotiated away in an attempt to win votes for a strong presidential system. They are already concerned that the constitution lacks protection for women's rights. For example, it lacks language explicitly defining "citizens" as both women and men and leaves women's rights in many areas vulnerable. In addition, the current version of the constitution does not contain language to protect Afghan

women from forced marriage, early marriage, or protect women's property rights.

The Loya Jirga is made up of 500 Afghans - including 116 women. International peacekeepers have been providing security for the delegates after warning that extremists may try to attack it. According to the Associated Press, a missile was fired towards the headquarters on December 13. Women's groups had written an Open Letter to the Bush administration asking for improved security, citing recent attacks on girls' schools in Afghanistan. In recent months, the Taliban has issued death threats against women who work for NGOs.

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Saudi prince comes calling with awards

PRINCE Talal Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud flew into the capital from Saudi Arabia to award winners of the Agfund International Prize for Pioneering Development Projects 2003.

This is an annual prize awarded by the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organisation (AGFUND). The prince is its



Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia

president. The total prize money is US\$ 300,000.00.

The first category prize for "Rehabilitation and employment of refugees and displaced people," went to UNIFEM for its work with women migrant workers in Asia. The second category prize for, "Protection of child against abuse and negligence," was awarded to Childline India Foundation for their 24-hour phone emergency service for children in distress. Started in Mumbai, the helpline, operates in 53 cities in 19 states.

The third category prize, for projects carried out by individuals in poverty alleviation, was won by Dr Martin Fisher and Mr Nick Moon from Kenya. Their organisation, the Appropriate Technologies for Enterprise Creation has invented small technologies which have increased income for poorer people.

If I were rain...

ON a wintry evening, the capital's celebrities gathered in full strength at the Habitat Centre to attend the launch of Youthreach's book "If I were rain". The auditorium was packed and Youthreach put up a lively presentation.

"If I were rain" is about hardworking children we meet everyday, selling newspapers, shining shoes, picking up waste, carrying luggage, doing household chores. Over 10 million children live, work, sleep, play, dream on the streets and sidewalks of our cities. We prefer to ignore them.

"All that we have is the earth and the sky," writes 14-year-old Chanda. "We take care of ourselves by working on the streets, not by stealing or begging," says 13-year-old Santosh.

The children tell their stories. And despite the many adversities they face, they emerge as intelligent, intuitive, compassionate and free. Many have run away from violence and abuse. Often, they live at railway stations and form strong



bonds of friendship with similar children. Their hearts ache for a family and home.

Here is one voice from the book: "My desire is to live in a nice little house with lots of open spaces surrounding it, where my friends can visit me and we can have fun together." And here is what another child says: "Every time I close my eyes, all I see is my mother's face."

"If I were rain" is emotional and captures the personalities of the children. There are profiles, paintings and poems. Read how NGOs are making a difference. Shekhar used to sell alcohol. He is now learning acting, song-writing and poetry. Yashoda, married as a child, has become a

computer teacher.

The book is structured around the framework of the Convention of the Rights of the Child adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989. India is a party to the agreement, but hasn't fulfilled its commitments.

"If I were rain," says Nanni Singh, Youthreach's youthful executive director, "attempts to create spaces that establish a connection-between our lives and theirs. A space which makes them visible and heard." Photo Editor Prabuddha Das Gupta has put together a priceless collection of pictures.

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Zulfi gets a jail job

CHANDIGARH'S jail authorities have roped in director-actor Zulfiqar Khan to run their new Entertainment Club. In our November issue, our Chandigarh correspondent Rathi Menon,

wrote about Zulfi and his theatre workshops for prison inmates and shoeshine boys.

Now jail authorities have decided to hire him so Zulfi is getting a monthly salary of Rs 5000. "Since I have a permanent income, we have decided to

employ some more teachers," informs Zulfi. "In fact we have started gathering old newspapers on a monthly basis and the money we are getting is enough for rations, books and pay some teachers." And jail officials can ask for lights, camera, action.

Will Afri-khadi bring back khadi?

THE new thread which binds South Africa and India is called Afri-khadi. Ela Gandhi, the Mahatma's grand-daughter is a Member of Parliament (MP) in South Africa and Chairman of the Gandhi Development Trust. She says the Gandhi parivar is supporting Afri-khadi.

"Poverty, violence, environmental degradation and education are the four problems facing society," she said. "Afri-khadi is one way to address all those issues. If it works we will say to big business, we don't need you," said Ela Gandhi at the Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi. To her, Afri-khadi was a perfect fit. It was about small

businesses, self-reliant and eco-friendly.

Afri-khadi is a blend of African design and Indian khadi. In recent years the hand-woven cloth has lost its



Jaya Jaitley and Ela Gandhi at Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi

market. The project to revive it was driven by the National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad, the Dastkari Haat Samiti, the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, (KVIC) the development commissioner (handicrafts) of the Union textile ministry and

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the Gandhi Development Trust of South Africa.

NID held a month-long workshop for Indian weavers and 15 craftspeople from South Africa. They produced 120 designs using African embroidery and beads.

A new company to market the clothes called the Confederation for Promotion of Khadi and Village Industries (CPKVI) has been formed. Chairperson Harish Shah says Afri-khadi will shed khadi's staid image. "The thrust is on youth. It is this segment that has the buying power. A new line will be brought out every six months and will cost between Rs 500 and Rs 1200."

In a rapidly globalising world, national symbols are often appropriated by business as marketing tools. To Indians,

khadi and the charka are emblems which belong to the nation. They are associated with truth, self-reliance, rural empowerment, non-violence. As Jaya Jaitley of the Samata party, pointed out khadi is a "provocative" cloth. Millions of people in rural areas continue to derive an income from spinning the charkha. According to Shah, more Muslim women weave the cloth, than Hindu women.

It was left to veteran Gandhians to gently caution the audience. PM Tripathi, chairman of the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (Avar) and

Ramchandra Rahi, secretary, Gandhi Memorial Trust questioned whether it was right to market khadi, solely as fashion.

Two Kashmiri newsmen Charkha fellows

THE Charkha Sanjoy Ghose Fellowships for Peace and Development were awarded to Ishfaq-ul-Hassan who works with the Kashmir Times and Haroon Rashid Shah of Nida-e-Mashriq. The fellowship has been given by the Charkha Development Communications Network to encourage reportage of people's aspirations and initiatives in the Valley.

Ishfaq will report on the trauma of families divided by the Line of Control and their desire for peace. Haroon will write about Kashmir's water-bodies, badly affected by militancy and environmental degradation.

The Dal Lake, once Bollywood's Mecca, is half dead, but Haroon added it was every Kashmiri's responsibility to revive it, not just the government's and the politicians.

A film "Random Voices from Kashmir" by Dr Pervez Imam, captured the opinions of ordinary people. They said that Kashmiri pundits must return home.

The Gaavaniyar artistes from the Urmul Trust, entertained the audience with puppets, songs and dances. Their story, on communal harmony and Gujarat, was about Hindus protecting Muslim families.

Justice BN Kirpal said development was critical for peace and that it was a shame, after 55 years of independence, elections were still being fought for BSP (*bijli, sadak, pani*).

From Medinipur with scrolls

By Manisha Sobhrajani

JHARNA Chitrakar, Nurjahan Chitrakar, Karuna Chitrakar... these are names of participating artists in the "Patuas of Medinipur" exhibition held at the British Council in New Delhi, recently.

The patuas or scroll-painters of this tiny village of Medinipur in West Bengal are an extremely skilled and creative community who derive this distinction from their narrative scroll-paintings. With their vibrant colours and bold strokes, they tell stories of yore, of times gone by and bring historical and mythological characters to life... Traditionally, the patuas told religious stories, accompanied by music and songs. However, now the art form is used to comment on social issues such as literacy and domestic violence.

This exhibition was part of a year long project run by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, in partnership with Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre, West Bengal, and London School of Economics. It is financed by the British Council. The project aims to sustain and develop the skills of the women patuas of Medinipur. Malini Bhattacharya, project coordinator says, "These painters have been helped to interact with urban designers and artists and also with marketing agencies so that they can pursue their craft with greater confidence and self-reliance. While earlier it was only paintings that the patuas did, now it is glass paintings, illustrated table tops, sarees, coasters, mats and various artefacts. This enables them to market their products better and improve their standard of living."

The patuas take pride in the art of preparing their own dyes from natural and vegetable sources. However, Roopkamal Chitrakar says, "now we even use readymade chemical-based colours due to shortage of time and to some extent, modernization." Every scroll-painter, be it man or woman, suffixes 'Chitrakar' to their names. They represent a popular syncretic tradition which excludes identification with the Hindu or

the Muslim religious community. "Patuas always marry patuas. We are a separate and unique community in ourselves," says Nurjahan Chitrakar. Swarna Chitrakar has two names. "I have a different name on my passport. But all my paintings and even the awards that I have won bear my name as Swarna Chitrakar," she explains.

Patuas are sometimes recruited by the government to campaign with their paintings on issues like literacy, immunization, family planning and environmental awareness. At times they even paint scrolls on national and global events like the Gujarat earthquake,

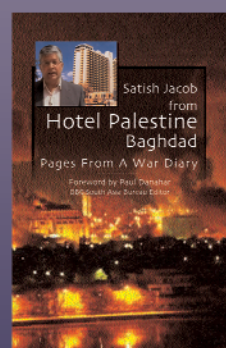
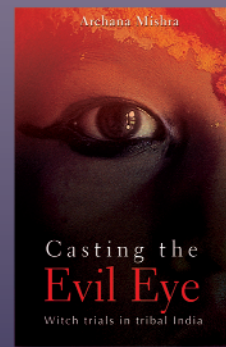
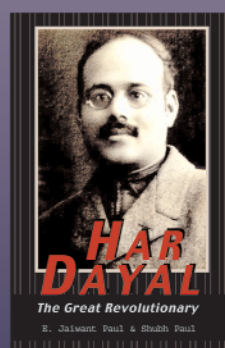
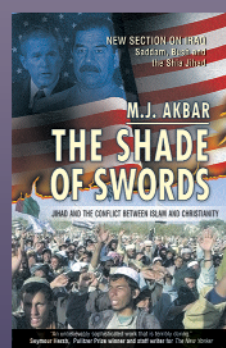
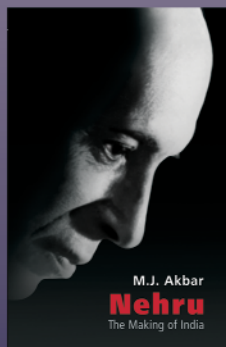
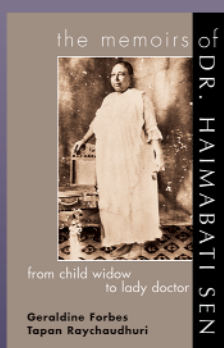


While earlier it was only paintings that the patuas did, now it is glass paintings, illustrated table tops, sarees, coasters, mats and various artefacts. This enables them to market their products better.

the 9/11 disaster etc. The patuas are an economically and socially vulnerable group. Yet they show a unique resolve to preserve their art. Efforts are on to encourage this endeavour and help the women patuas to develop their skills and acquire a degree of self-sufficiency. While Swarna, the passport holder, says she gives all the money to her husband and he manages their finances, Rupan Chitrakar says that selling her paintings gives her economic independence. "If I need money, I take a loan and repay it myself!"

At a time when rapid urbanisation and the aggressive incursion of the audiovisual media is jeopardising the popularity of all traditional art forms, the women patuas, and their men, are struggling to preserve their means of livelihood as well as the dignity of their craft. Ironically, the urban metropolitan market can alone ensure their survival as artists.

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So, where should we hide our less clever children?

KABIR MUSTAFI

RECENTLY I received, from a friend and colleague, the annual chronicle of his school. The bulk of the issue is a celebration of the fantastic IIT results attained by several of the school's students, including that of the national topper. On closer examination, we saw that 20 girls and boys had qualified from among 191 children and that in the school's board exam results, eight children scored between 89% and 93% among whom were three IIT qualifiers ranked 337, 3286 and 1487.

These statistics are similar to those published, from time to time, by tutorial shops and are, for me, dauntingly impressive. I have often felt they were nails on my professional coffin, certifiers of my failure as a headmaster. Until I tried a little bearding of lions.

I am extremely relieved to report with some authority that most schools, consistently trusted by parents, have about 10% of their children going in for each of the various tertiary options, through colleges and institutes and, later, professions. This means that about 10% opt for engineering, 10% for medicine, 10% for other professional areas and so on. And that other than the occasional under-achiever, by and large, the number of credit and distinction cases in an outgoing Class XII batch are pretty much the same.

So what should we conclude from this?

That the hype, tension and paranoia are genies of our minds. They are spectres that we conjure through hypothesis and rhetoric, giving them shape and form through publicity and circulation. Rumour and legend feed on one another and grow to become myths. Myths are presented as truths. And if they go unchallenged, that's what they become.

And what are these myths?

That "everyone" wants to make it to IIT.

That if you do get in your life is made.

That the best career is in the IAS and the best route is via IIT or medical.

That unless you are a physics or maths type, you are not at the forefront of the academic world.

That if you are not an academic topper you are inadequately educated.

That without the right credentials life is pretty hopeless.

That the credentials can be obtained by hard work or by hours and hours of mugging.

That nothing should come in the way of one's academic pursuit.

That life is worth nothing unless you make it big, in power and pelf.

That the best route is the competitive exam.

That for this CBSE is better, since the ICSE/ISC syllabus doesn't address competitive exam requirements.

That the ICSE/ISC has no takers and all parents want CBSE.

That colleges down grade ICSE/ISC marks.

And how may these myths be challenged?

By enquiry, statistics and study. By refutation from concerned professionals. And by appreciation of instances of relativity and relevance.

And what may the challenge state?

That for as many students who want to get into IIT about five times the number have no wish to.

That even if you get in, your life will only "be made" if you are bright, creative, multi-skilled, responsible and have a healthy respect for God and your fellow beings.

That the IAS is as good a career as your professionalism will make it. And as bad as you make it, if you don't have what it takes.

That power and pelf are the least lasting, the least respectable, when life's course is run.

That to have what it takes means a varied intellect embellished by skills and ability, the skill to read, understand, interpret and deduce. The ability to transfer learning to differing situations and to think creatively, not only for art and aesthetics but for products,

solutions and answers, for day-to-day situations and the human circumstances and the bizarre strangeness of individual situations.

That it is the primary responsibility of a school to train its students for a lifetime of worth.

That such training cannot be secondary to tuitions and examinations. It is like quality becoming secondary to profit.

That in order for such training to prevail, a school has to make provisions for facilities that will promote and provide opportunities for breadth, depth, the conjunction of scientific enquiry with literary and aesthetic criticism

as well as for a spirit of adventure. The best counter for human arrogance is the humility that Nature dictates and the bigness of a man is seen when he knows what it means to be small.

That as a country we have beggared our own wealth by taking away training from literacy and distorted education to mean marks, marks and more marks.

That we have achieved this by downsizing content, not in the chapters but in testing by becoming more specific, virtually to the exclusion of research, presentation, comprehension and analysis. It is no wonder that our certifications are yet to be as globally accepted as say, the A levels of Cambridge or the International Baccalaureate. And no wonder six out of every ten aspirants for a job are unemployable.

That far from being undervalued, the ICSE/ISC is a highly respected exam. Tertiary institutions and employers know that the ICSE/ISC in conjunction with a school, which has a broad curriculum, makes a candidate worth investing in.

That the CBSE is also striving towards flexibility and empowerment of the students but the efforts of both these and other progressive state boards are hampered by the confining dictates of the schools themselves. We flout norms, defy systems and ignore instructions. Principals overrule supervising examiners in the conduct of examinations and encourage dishonesty. In contravention of Supreme Court directives, they refuse to take back low grade pass candidates, they "weed out" weak students after "selection" tests and put up as perfect a class for the board examination as their conscience will allow. Examiners disclose evaluation and confidential marks and paper-setters take tuition and tutors prefer not to teach in

class. What is it all for? Some massive cover up or some pathetic illusion?

Are we trying to hide away our less able children? Do we prefer not to acknowledge them because they are an embarrassment? Or are we ashamed that we are not doing enough for them and don't know how to go about correcting this without losing our image of success?

All too often we sneer at the Government schools, think of them as a bad joke, appalled by stories and sights of neglect. However, it is also humbling to know that there are hundreds of Government schools which, without discrimination or favour, impart a more grounded and catholic education to thousands of children, despite daunting and crippling disadvantages ranging from enormous numbers in a single class (would you believe 600 in the science section of Class XI? Because you can't refuse or turn away or choose?) to absolutely no facilities whatsoever.

And yet in the midst of all this, despite our best efforts, the children are irrepressible. They carve spaces for themselves even in the worst of circumstances of deprivation, exploitation and brutality, brought about by the terrifying pace of change and the mindless selfishness that it has generated.

They refuse to be put down and demand much more than we give. And perhaps that will be our saving grace, to learn how to give by learning that we don't.

Kabir Mustafi is the headmaster of Bishop Cotton School, Shimla.



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