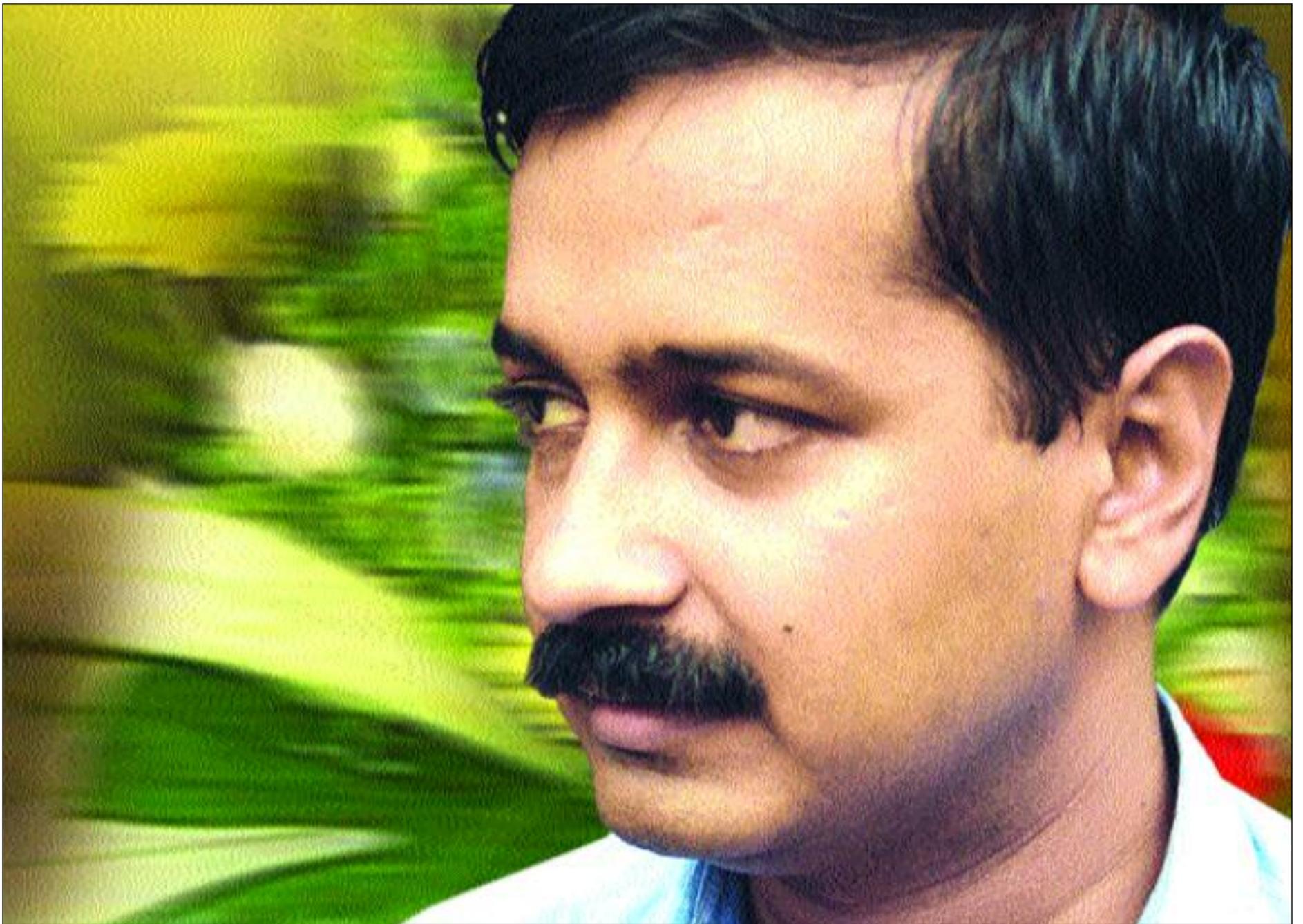


CIVIL SOCIETY



TAXMAN'S BURDEN

Arvind is an I-T officer fighting for the citizen's right to information. Can he bring transparency to Delhi?

COVER STORY



THE RIGHT TO KNOW

Parivartan has taken up the cause of the citizen's right to information and launched its campaign in Sundernagri, a poor and dilapidated neighbourhood in East Delhi

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Civil Society

It's everyone's India

CIVIL society plays a creative and important role in India. More NGOs exist today than ever before. A good many of them improve the lives of ordinary people in a way the government does not. These are dramatic stories and deserve to be told. More importantly, the strategies and ideas that agents of change use need to be recorded and analysed. Most efforts, however, are dispersed and in isolation. Experience invariably does not get passed on. It is important that this exchange takes place.

It is also important that society at large has a better understanding of disaggregate processes of change. Activists either live in the cocoons of their own efforts or talk in a language that no one else can understand. Terrible are the misunderstandings that result from the inability to communicate. Doctors, lawyers, parliamentarians, students, businessmen, bankers, stockbrokers, financial analysts, who may want to know what civil society is up to, have no coherent link for being in touch. Such a link is important for creating transparency and accountability in civil society. It is needed for putting an end to mindless suspicions.

Civil society also encompasses the free flow of ideas from a range of individuals who may not be working within structured organisations but could be merely going about their daily lives. From the death penalty to consumer rights, so much needs to be thought through. It is important that ideas and opinions circulate. There are many layers to every issue and there is real danger in the dominance of a few voices that control the levers of mass communication.

Arvind Kejriwal and Parivartan figure on this cover because of the contradictions surrounding their efforts in implementing the Right to Information Act in Delhi — and doing so among the poor in the Indian Capital's slums. Arvind is an income-tax officer and a most unlikely protagonist for the cause he has chosen.

To us, he reflects the complexities of an evolving India. It is equally interesting that the campaign for the citizen's right to information owes much to Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit. Politicians aren't exactly known for opening up government. But she sponsored the Delhi state law on the right to information and has shown willingness to implement it.

There are stories here which deal with wide-ranging issues being discussed in the development sector from the government's controversial plan to link rivers to the long-standing problem of rehabilitation in the Narmada Valley. In Bhopal we found that the bickering between NGOs was delaying relief for the victims of the gas tragedy.

Our book review segment examines Sushobha Barve's *Healing Streams*, which dissects communal riots in Mumbai and tells the story of the movement to bring disputing communities together into *mohalla* committees. Aruna Roy was generous enough to pen the Essay of this inaugural issue. We could not have been luckier in our search for original ideas. We would like to throw open the Essay in every issue to people who have something to say.

We also look at a postal service for the homeless, an eye hospital which balances charity with profit or a village school run by the country's first woman Airbus pilot. Rajender Singh tells the real story of why his dam burst in Alwar.

We would like our World pages to evolve into an Asian forum. There are so many ways in which civil society can compensate for the shortsightedness of our politicians. The story of what BRAC is doing so effectively in Afghanistan is an example of the kind of success that flows from regional sensitivities. There is little doubt that NGOs and civil society in India and Pakistan need to communicate much more. Dr Devi Shetty, the noble heart surgeon in Bangalore, has shown how new bonds of friendship can be created through medical science.

The big media has its own role to play. It has its own priorities. We like to believe that much more biodiversity is required in the media. Skills and new technologies make it possible to create small businesses that serve information needs. Civil Society is one such endeavour.

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Write to Civil Society at C-1, Second Floor, Main Shopping Centre Vasant Vihar New Delhi. Ph: 9811787772, E-mail: civil_society@rediffmail.com

CAUSE & EFFECT

Combative Hazare gets some more concessions

Civil Society News

Mumbai

NOTED social activist Anna Hazare called off his nine day fast on August 17, after the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Sushil Kumar Shinde conceded his major demands.

Hazare and his political detractor Suresh Jain, minister for food and civil supplies, had started rival fasts on August 9, at Mumbai's Azad Maidan.

Hazare had made nine demands to the government, including the resignation of four Democratic Front ministers, Suresh Jain, Padma Sinh Patel, Vijay Gavit and Nawab Malik on corruption charges. Jain reciprocated and accused Hazare of corruption in his Hind Swaraj Trust, set up by the noted activist to develop backward villages.

In response to Hazare's demands, the Democratic Front government has appointed former Supreme Court judge PB Sawant to probe charges of corruption against the four ministers and to inquire into alleged irregularities in the Hind Swaraj Trust.

The government has also agreed to implement the Right to Information Act. According to its provisions, officials who refuse to provide information without valid reasons, can be punished. If an official delays the request he will be penalized.

In addition, government has approved draft legislation to regulate transfer of officials to cut red tape. According to the draft, the tenure of All India Service officials will be for three years. Group C officials outside the Mantralaya will be shifted every six years.

Officials will have to clear files sent to them within seven days. If the matter is urgent, only three days will be given. Files which don't have to be travel to different departments will be cleared within 45 days. Files which require scrutiny by other departments will have to be passed within three months.

The government has sent a written assurance to Hazare saying that the administration would fulfill its promises. The letter also states that a nominee of Hazare's will be involved in framing rules for gram panchayats.

"I have as head of government, tried everything possible to satisfy him," said the Chief Minister.

The noted social activist has lost four kilos and his blood pressure has been fluctuating. He preferred not to comment on his gains.

In June, Hazare was awarded the Integrity Award by Transparency International for his relentless crusade against corruption. He has submitted more than 700 such cases to the government. Hazare has also set up Anti-Corruption Committees in Maharashtra with a team of lawyers to examine cases brought to them by citizens. His energetic campaign contributed to the defeat of the Shiv Sena during the last assembly elections in Maharashtra. His disclosures have forced the government to act against corrupt officials in the forest department.

Hazare says he is not in favour of waging agitations, but has been left with no choice. "I am for constructive work. But when I saw that thousands of crores of rupees allocated for rural development do not reach villages at all, that barely 12 paise of a sanctioned rupee is actually spent on development work, I took up cudgels against corruption".

In 1975, his village Ralegaon Siddhi was barren and poor. He had just retired from the army. He spent his savings rebuilding the village. Hazare's example motivated villagers to volunteer their labor. Through water harvesting and other sustainable methods, Anna brought prosperity to his people. Today, Ralegaon Siddhi is a model self-sufficient village, with a grain bank, a milk bank and a school. However, his strict moral code which bans cable TV among other things, is questioned by many.



'7 dams burst then ours'

Rajendra Singh tells real Alwar story

Civil Society News

New Delhi

AS the monsoon battered Rajasthan, a check dam built by villagers without the involvement of the government at Lava Ka Bas in Alwar district was back in the news: this time because it had breached and added to the flood hazards of the season. Officialdom was quick with its condemnation of the dam, pronouncing that it had all along been unsafe, built as it had been with villagers and not the government's engineers. This is what the media reported. Overlooked was the fact that a great many dams built by the government had also breached in the heavy downpour. The Lava Ka Bas dam actually gave way after seven others preceding it fell apart. Those were all government-built dams. Rajender Singh of the Tarun Bharat Sangh and a key architect of Rajasthan's movement for community efforts in water management said the Lava Ka Bas dam had in fact shown greater resilience than the government's dams. The Tarun Bharat Sangh has worked over the years to galvanise villages into harvesting water and conserving it. It has successfully brought back traditional systems of water management such as tanks, ponds and wells so as to raise the water table in drought-prone Rajasthan. The Lava Ka Bas dam in Alwar district is a part of these efforts at moving management of water as a resource out of the domain of the government and handing it over to people.

When the dam was constructed two years ago on funds raised locally, the government declared it illegal. It also said

that it was technologically unsafe. The dam was then subjected to public scrutiny in an effort sponsored by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and cleared for its design and construction. Excerpts from an interview with Rajender Singh:

Your dam has breached and everyone says that is because it was not scientifically built. What do you have to say?

It is a technically sound dam. The biggest proof of this is that a structure should be able to respond to overflow. This has been happening at Lava Ka Bas. On June 19 there was a heavy downpour in which the nearby Kamala Sagar dam, built at the cost of crores of rupees by the government and operational for the first time this year, collapsed. Our dam has been around for three years. If it had been unsafe or unsound it would have burst in the heavy downpour. Instead it handled the overflow. It is only when seven other dams, all of them built by the government, collapsed that ours breached. Naturally you cannot expect one small dam to take the load of seven. So I would like to say that our dam did not break up but was broken down by the inefficiencies of the government. The villagers there have told this to the district officials. They have said since the government is responsible for the breaking the dam at Lava Ka Bas, it should now rebuild it. If the government does not do that, people will rebuild it.

This is bound to be demoralising for local people. The government's dams collapse, your dam collapses...why would anyone want to start from scratch against such odds?

When people do things with their own

hands, they have the confidence to do it again and again. People will rebuild this dam because of what it has given them in the last three years or so. It has delivered them from shortages. They know better than anyone the benefits they have derived.

So what you are saying is that the dam has not only given people water, it has given them self-confidence as well.

Yes. There is also a finer point. When people collectively do something for their collective future, they acquire a capability that is lacking when they sit back and the government does things for them. If this had been a government-built dam, people would have gone and protested, blocked roads and so on. Instead, they have merely given the government a deadline to rebuild it, after which they will do it themselves. This is the whole point of our movement. Community resources should be left to the community to manage.

Do you think a change in design of the dam is called for?

No I do not think so. It was built not on some distant drawing board, but after months of patient research in the area. It was built on the basis of community knowledge of rainfall patterns. It was also built with local materials at a low cost.

But surely the situation is different now that seven government dams have come up. What are the lessons you have learnt?

The basic design and technology will remain the same, but we will increase the overflow. You see a design is based on some estimate of the worst possible rainfall. Our estimate was for the next fifty years. The rain we had this monsoon was not anticipated.

WHY GOVT MADE PEPSI EAT ITS AD

Civil Society News

Delhi

SO, what were PepsiCo and Coca-Cola up to when their Indian bosses went on television and put out advertisements to say the government had declared their soft drinks safe for consumption? Were these two gentlemen knowingly misleading consumers or had their communications advisers misled them?

The government of India's health ministry has accused PepsiCo of "willfully concealing with questionable motives" the results of the government's tests on cold drinks. A letter written and by the Joint Secretary (health and family welfare) and made public on August 25 said neither Coke nor Pepsi had been given a clean chit by the government. Claims that they had been cleared were false and Pepsi, which had published advertisements to this effect, should tender an unconditional apology. The apology the government wanted was in advertisements in the same newspapers where space had been bought to air the false claims.

This was strong stuff coming as it did close on the heels of the multinationals saying the Centre for Science and Environment's (CSE) study, which showed pesticides in their drinks above EU levels, was baseless.

PepsiCo's face on the box was Rajeev Bakshi and Coke's was Sanjiv Gupta. Both men are the heads of their companies in India. Both have been eager to claim that the products they sell in India are the same as those that are sold in Europe and America.

Their charge against CSE was that its laboratory was not equipped to test the colas and that it was not an accredited laboratory.

But when the government conducted its own tests it found that eight of twelve brands had pesticide residues above the European norms. Yet, when the results were made public, they were read the other way around. Instead of saying that the majority of samples had residues above the EU limits, it was declared that four samples had residues below the EU limit.

Why health minister Sushma Swaraj chose to do that is anybody's guess, but taking their cue from this, both companies claimed in the print media and on TV that their products were safe and had been declared as such by the government. Pepsi went and put out its advertisements.

But as word spread that the government had played along with the cola companies, the Union health ministry felt it necessary to set the record right. The joint secretary's missive read:

"Your advertisement is misleading as only a part of one sentence given in the statement of the minister before the Lok Sabha has been used in the advertisement. It is obvious that the remaining part of the sentence has been willfully concealed with questionable motives."

It went on to say: "Your claim that your product is conforming to EU norms is not true."

CSE goes beyond colas

Civil Society News

Delhi

THE Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has been in the eye of a storm after going public with its findings of pesticide residues in soft drinks sold in India. Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have accused CSE of looking for easy publicity by attacking big brands.

Both the cola giants used their



extensive public relations networks to try and defame CSE and its director Sunita Narain. An NGO is no match for huge corporations. And if CSE continued to be heard, it is only because of the respect people have for the quality of CSE's work.

CSE's campaign's on water quality, clean air and chemicals in our food chain speak of years of commitment to cleaning up the environment. Before questioning its motives, one must clear about what CSE was asking for when it released its findings on Pepsi and Coke.

In a note circulated at the press conference held to announce the findings, CSE made the following points:

Fix the fixers

Soft drinks must be brought under

stringent health based standards. For pesticides. For other substances. Don't do this for isolated cases, but do this for all food standards. Review not for industry's convenience, but for public health imperatives.

Fix groundwater use

The soft drinks and bottle water industries use huge amounts of groundwater. The use of this water is not regulated and rarely paid for. In the new notification for bottle water, under pressure from industry, the government dropped reference to regulation of groundwater. Use of groundwater for commercial use must be regulated.

Fix the real pests

A policy is needed for the safe and wise use of pesticides. The push for a new generation of products, less toxic and hazardous must begin now. Once soils, water and food are contaminated, one cannot afford to clean up. There is no antidote other than change.

Fix our drinking water

We demand legally enforceable drinking water standards in the country. This is our fundamental right give it to us.

While CSE posted its findings on the Internet for global scrutiny, Coke and Pepsi continued to harp on CSE's laboratory not having government accreditation. Neither company had a record of tests regularly conducted on its soft drinks which it could offer for public scrutiny.

In fact, statements by the executives of the two cola companies seemed to suggest that they preferred self-regulation to anything else. "CSE could have come to us. What was the need of going to the press," one of these executives said on television. "We drink it. Our children drink it. It is absolutely safe," was a much-quoted response. "Do you think we would play the fool with such valuable brands," said another executive.

Pepsi's Indian head, Rajeev Bakshi, went on Pronnoy Roy's TV news capsule on NDTV to declare that the Pepsi sold in India is same as the Pepsi sold in Europe.

Bakshi then gave an interview to Business Standard in which he said that European standards should not be applied to products in India. This prompted Business Standard to ask in an editorial the next day: "...so what standards does he want, considering that there are no proper standards in India? Neither of the soft drinks companies has offered to work with the government to adopt appropriate standards for India; and if they do, it is more than likely that they will push for lenient standards."

CSE began some two decades ago and took several strides in understanding the environmental problems of the country under Anil Agarwal, an IIT-trained engineer who took to journalism. Agarwal died a year ago after several heroic battles with cancer and Sunita Narain, his colleague from the very beginning took over from him.

The Citizens' Report on the State of India's Environment was the first effort of its kind. It created a public record what was happening to the air, water, soil and forests. The government never bothered to generate such information and with it CSE began a new trend in looking at the country's natural resources and understanding the economic implications of their decline.

The decision to have a CSE laboratory emanated from the problems faced with testing samples of petrol and diesel for adulteration during its clean air campaign. The samples could only be tested at the government's facility if they were forwarded by an official of the government. A laboratory was needed to put facts about pollution in the public domain. CSE's clean air campaign finally resulted in CNG being used in Delhi.

Govt puts radio out of community reach

There are hardly any takers for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's community radio scheme launched six months ago. The ministry was offering a six-month licence to universities, technology and management institutes and residential schools, to broadcast education programmes for their students. Some seven months later, only 35 applications have arrived and half will be returned because they don't meet the norms.

NGOs would be eager to take up licences to broadcast community programmes, but they have not been made eligible. An NGO has to team up with an educational institution and this meets neither's requirement.

Another headache is the government's bureaucracy. Applicants have to deposit Rs 50,000 and every application has to wind its way through the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Home Affairs, Defence, Human Resource Development and External Affairs.

Clearly, it is daunting to join the radio licence queue.

The government has now set up a committee under Amit

Mitra of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) to take a fresh look at the whole range of licensing issues. Mitra's efforts will chiefly be directed at sorting out anomalies in commercial licensing. But there is also a chance that the demand for community radio will be seriously addressed.

Experts at a recent consultation on ICT's for Development, organized by UNDP and Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore made a strong appeal for community-owned radio. The right of the people, especially the poor, to be producers of information, needed to be recognised. In fact, radio as a medium thrives on local appeal.

Community radio experiments which have been conducted in Kutch and Karnataka show that people want to raise issues such as alcoholism and women's rights. The weather and water conservation are high priority as well. These experiments have been successful in teams of local reporters with no previous experience in journalism.

According to the government, radio programme content

should be on education, health, environment, and rural development. Commercial advertising is prohibited. The NGOs ask how else will they raise revenue? The guidelines are also unclear about sponsorships. For instance, would the Ministry of Environment or other government departments be permitted to sponsor programmes on environment, gender and rural development?

NGOs who have experience in community radio say production of content requires low recurrent costs. The initial capital costs in setting up a programme for Alternatives for India Development (AID) in Daltonganj, Jharkhand, has been about Rs. 2.5 lakhs. The organization spends annually Rs 5 to 6 lakhs on its staff of 16 reporters, one technical person and one program coordinator. The weekly slot on AIR costs them Rs.2500, per slot.

Collection of subscriptions and fund-raising events are also good sources of revenue. One community radio project in Nepal used a rice-collection drive to raise money. Financial support from donors is also important.



PILOT FOR A SCHOOL

Capt. Indraani Singh flies planes for a living, but teaches poor village children in her spare time

Civil Society News
Gurgaon, Haryana

CAPTAIN Indraani Singh flies planes for a living, but off duty she pilots a school for the children of Chauma village in Haryana's Gurgaon district. "I believe most of our problems can be solved through better education. This is my way of doing something towards that end," she says in her office-shed.

Captain Singh was the first woman in Asia to command an Airbus. But she flits effortlessly between the two worlds of her job with Indian Airlines and the muddy bylanes of Chauma.

Her clean but airless office-shed has been her other cockpit for the past eight years as she built the school from scratch with her savings, confronting apathy and local suspicions. Now there are a handful of corporate donors, but Literacy India still survives on a few lakhs of rupees and much bigger sums of enthusiasm.

The problem with education is that it is not a sexy cause. It is difficult to convince people that there is a need for voluntary effort to reform the system and make it more

responsive." Education does not catch attention like AIDS or the problems of the handicapped and donors tend to shy away," she says. "The government has the infrastructure and reach but lacks the will to act, so education for the masses remains grounded."

In Gurgaon the problem is particularly complex. Better known for its shopping malls and expensive group housing, it is really a huge rural district caught up in the process of deep-seated change. The disparities are dramatic and growing. As the city spills into fields and pastures, villages shrink into oblivion. Municipalities do not bother with rural areas. Garbage collects and water stagnates. Migrants seeking work, overcrowd villages. The lack of adequate education forces landless farmers into the informal sector.

This is where Captain Singh comes in with her NGO, offering quality education for those who would normally be deprived of it. Local village children and those of migrants are her clients. The school fees

are Rs 5 per month. Children are provided transport, food, clean clothes and healthcare. A computer learning centre has been started with help from NIIT. The education programmes are tailored for children.

Pathshala, the first programme Captain Singh introduced, imparts education for two hours in the

evening. Children studying in regular schools can get free tuition in Maths, English, Commerce. First-time learners are taught the basics and become familiar with the school system. The Vidyapeeth programme functions every morning. Children are taught upto Class V and helped to join formal schools. For those who make it to the formal school,



the Gurukul programme is a scholarship which covers the cost of uniforms, books and transport.

The Karigari programme targets children over 16 years of age who are dropouts. They are taught motor mechanics, driving, plumbing and electrical work. Captain Singh is dissatisfied with the program. Literacy India provides the student a stipend of Rs 500 per month but this is insufficient, she says. A child can pick up these skills and more money by becoming an apprentice with an experienced person, she points out. A few youngsters trained in software design found jobs, and Singh is examining newer employment options in the hotel industry and the apparel sector.

Such opportunities will increasingly require better education. Captain Singh is helping stem the dropout rate by ensuring education is also a fun activity. Children tire of improving their reading by reciting poems and stories from faded textbooks.

Instead, theatre and street plays are used so that children not only better their reading but also increase self-confidence. The National School of Drama (NSD) is providing training and working with the school. Thirty eight children between 5-14 years, staged Ali Baba Aur Chalis Chor at the Habitat Centre in New Delhi, and the troupe even traveled to Calcutta. A second production Charandas Chor followed and received much applause. Opportunities to act for television productions have opened up.

The children are also participating in street plays to spread awareness and mobilise village communities. Captain Singh hopes to complete 500 street plays by 2004 on cleanliness, the importance of the girl child, the small family norm and communal harmony. Posters are put up two days before the nukkad natak is staged. Enough noise is made to attract the people. In the course of this programme Captain Singh and her team have identified unhygienic living conditions, stagnant water and garbage as the main issues.

An action team of 25 youngsters from the village and volunteers from Literacy India then begins to clean up the mess.

The shoddy education provided by government schools is a major issue in all villages. Captain Singh has made valiant attempts to work with them. Children from Literacy India join these schools and her teachers monitor their performance. She offered to upgrade the government school in Chauma. "The principal told me to first close down my school," she recalls. The few schools who do respond, like the one in Samalkha, have good principals battling indifferent staff. The rest are hostile.

The street plays are now directed at the government school teachers. "We try to tell them they are responsible for their actions," she says. The children teachers don't teach will grow up and have only contempt for them. A script on this theme has been written. But Captain Singh is unsure whether this will change their attitude.

GURGAON LEARNS TO SPEAK UP

As malls attract shoppers in thousands and play havoc with suburban life, residents get tough with the administration

Civil Society News
Gurgaon, Haryana

RESIDENTS say water and electricity are in short supply, roads are in a mess and public transport non-existent. Swank shopping malls are proliferating, burdening the expanding city's creaky infrastructure. Under the banner of People's Action, resident welfare associations (RWAs) met the District Collector Anurag Rastogi, and asked for action against the "heedless growth of shopping malls, the traffic menace and wayward electricity and water supply."

The administration has hired three cranes with wailing sirens to carry away wrongly parked vehicles and clear traffic snarls near the malls. The parking lot managements of the malls plead they don't have space for so many cars, but have been told to restructure their arrangements, anyway. Since the police force is inadequate, private security guards have been put on duty at traffic intersections.

Sanjay Kaul of People's Action says he appreciates the administration's sincere but sloppy efforts. "For instance, we asked them to block intersections on the road so that traffic would be forced to move in an orderly manner. A tape and some stones were used."

The RWAs set up a special sub-committee on the Right to Information, but they still don't know how many shopping malls are likely to spring up in the months ahead. While the resident's council is mulling the feasibility of a massive demonstration against the malls, people are getting more vocal about thundering gensets and flashy neon lights. Inmates of Beverly Park, a plush group housing complex, prevented one shopping mall from digging a bore-well. A fire in another was investigated by People's Action. They found safety norms were not up to the mark and informed the administration.

Consumption of electricity has increased several times over,

so the administration cannot promise steady power supply. Instead a help-line for electricity complaints has been recently set up. Residents will be informed in advance about load-shedding schedules. Transformers in every colony are also being inspected, to see if builders have installed the correct number. Rainwater harvesting is now mandatory in all new buildings, though it is unclear who will provide the technical expertise. A report on groundwater is being prepared and water supply augmented. Talks are on for a local bus service.

Most residents migrated from Delhi, lured by Gurgaon's new housing colonies and wild promises made by builders. Instead, this burgeoning new city is gradually turning into a concrete jun-

gle. The administration, more at ease with governing a sleepy small town, is being called on to tackle big city problems by a wealthy elite. Disillusioned RWA's united under People's Action and chalked out a five-point agenda and a plan of action two months ago. A council and several committees were formed.

During discussions residents wanted to replicate Delhi's bhagidari scheme. Amina Sherwani of the Women's Action Forum in DLF had emphasised activating the administration. Residents also asked for the right to information to be enforced. But they admitted the administration was not responsible for every problem and people should exercise self-regulation. For instance, citizens could practice some road ethics by driving in

Photo: LAKSHMAN ANAND



their lanes and parking their cars in proper slots. There was no need to waste potable water on washing cars, either. Similarly, gunny bags could be used to dispose of waste, instead of littering the landscape with plastic bags. There was scope for RWAs to impose fines on erring members.

Kaul said if citizens formed a strong lobby they could bypass builders, an apathetic administration and political leaders. He had recommended inflicting "electoral damage" on unworthy candidates. But in the last assembly elections many new residents did not register as voters, or bother to vote.

Squabbling NGOs leave Bhopal victims in lurch

Civil Society News
Bhopal

WITH the Indian government finally moving to seek the extradition of former Union Carbide Chairman Warren Anderson, there is some movement forward in ensuring justice for the victims of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. But the greatest impediment in this quest, not so obvious to people outside Bhopal, remains the failure of the two most important NGOs working on the issue to pull together.

The two NGOs are the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan run by Abdul Jabbar and the Bhopal Group for Information and Action run by Satinath Sarangi. In terms of work on the ground, such as taking up the problems affecting the gas widows, the day to day problems that crop up for the victims in terms of medical attention, payment of compensation, dealing with the administration and pressuring the state government, it is Jabbar's organisation that is by far the most active.

While Sarangi is involved with a number of organisations that work on the ground in Bhopal, his role is crucial in networking with the wider array of NGOs working globally on this issue. He is the representative of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB), and is instrumental in ensuring a flow of information to the www.bhopal.net website. Sarangi has coordinated

closely with Greenpeace, whenever they have intervened in Bhopal.

But as became obvious in December last year on the occasion of the 18th anniversary, the failure of these two organisations to coordinate has serious repercussions. Greenpeace volunteers along with Sarangi attempted to enter the Union Carbide premises to draw attention to the chemicals still lying on the premises, only to be brutally stopped by the police. The event invited international condemnation but met with a very lukewarm reception in Bhopal.

First, Jabbar's organisation questioned the motive behind the event, alleging that it was diverting attention from far more serious issues such as the health impact of the continued contamination of groundwater around the factory site and the delay in providing justice to the victims. The local media, always likely to dub any foreigners as CIA agents and indeed this was done, is far more conversant with the work Jabbar is doing and reacted in a hostile manner to the Greenpeace initiative.

In May this year, two women survivors Rasheeda Bee and Champa Devi as well as Sarangi, launched a fast in New York's financial district to draw attention to the liabilities of Dow Chemical. Union Carbide has merged with Dow since the tragedy, in Bhopal. While this has resulted in a group of US Congressmen writing to Dow to own up responsibility, in Bhopal the failure of this initiative to

include members from other NGOs has only led to calls for accounting of all the 'foreign money being collected in the names of the victims'.

Subsequently, even when the two organisations agree upon an issue, such as the neglect of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy orphans, by the Digvijay government, press conferences are held separately and the two organisations are unable to work together despite the fact that each NGOs is doing work that should actually complement what the other is doing. Indeed, part of the problem may lie with the perception that NGOs based in Delhi or New York bring with them. Much of the funding tends to flow to organisations such as Sarangi's which are represented by persons fluent in English with the necessary back-up to prepare slick and comprehensive proposals in the language. Organisations such as Jabbar's which are in close touch with the grassroots often lack the resources and the skills necessary for such an initiative, much to their detriment.

Whatever be the cause, the impact in Bhopal, which is what counts in any fight for justice, is rather grave. The efforts going on internationally are getting divorced from the work being done in Bhopal itself and local opinion is increasingly negative about the role of 'foreign' organisations, neither of which augurs well for a cause which has already suffered much due to governmental and institutional apathy.

The greatest impediment in the quest for justice is the failure of the two most important NGOs working on the issue to unite



A Ghotala Yatra is taken out during the Jan Niti Abhiyan organised by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan. The MKSS sought to highlight corruption and create watch groups for the forthcoming elections.

MKSS has been trying to motivate people to exercise their responsibilities as citizens. An important aspect of the campaign is the right to information.



JAN NITI ABHIYAN

Charity from profit at Dr Shroff's

Civil Society News

New Delhi

Here is a hospital which wants to attract the rich to serve the poor. Dr Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital (SCEH) in Delhi's old quarter of Daryaganj is as plush as any fancy private hospital. The interiors are clean and pretty, the staff polite and helpful. The doctors have been trained at the best institutes in the US and UK.

But nearly 50% of services are reserved for the needy. The hospital follows a traditional charter laid down by its founder, Dr Sorabji P Shroff. He belonged to a modest Parsi family in Lahore. In 1914 Dr Shroff shifted to Delhi and started an eye clinic for poor people in one room in the walled city.

The demand for his services grew. Eminent philanthropist Haji Mohammed allowed Dr Shroff to use one storey of his building, but that too proved insufficient. Dr Shroff approached the British for land and was snubbed because as a Municipal Corporation member he had refused to vote according to their wishes.

The Vicerene Lady Reading, impressed with his humaneness, interceded and in 1924 the colonial administration gave him land in Daryaganj to start a hospital. In 1927, Lady Irwin inaugurated the new building.

Last year nearly 3,500 surgeries were performed, free of cost. There is a satellite clinic in Alwar, which provides doorstep services. The district has the highest number of cataract patients in India. With a population of three million, it used to be served by less than 20 ophthalmologists.

mologists.

Since rich and poor are equally served, the cost of providing charity is rather high. Well-off patients pay and the money is used to subsidise the rest. But the ratio of rich to poor is still a relatively unimpressive 30:70.

The problem is the notion of charity, says Shantanu Dasgupta, marketing manager.

People think a charitable hospital can offer only poor services. For many the price paid for anything free is shoddiness. The hospital is trying to change things by delicately balancing an image of quality, charity and trust.

Dasgupta thinks the gap may narrow in three or four years. The hospital reached its lowest point in 1992 when nearly all its services were free. An appeal for help was made. A saviour appeared in the form of Eicher Goodearth. New equip-



Orbis has been working closely with SCEH to upgrade medical equipment and skill levels. Young doctors from the hospital have been trained abroad. Three years ago money from Ronald Macdonald House Charities was funneled through

Orbis to set up a clinic specializing in paediatric ophthalmology, one of the few in south-east Asia, according to Dasgupta.

The clinic has caught the attention of middle-class families. It has a playroom with a slide, pink cushioned floors, pictures of bears and monkeys in a barrier-free environment. Mothers say it's hard to drag children away.

The emphasis is on preventing blindness, especially among the young, through early intervention. India already has 18 million people who are needlessly blind. The Vision Enhancement Centre (VEC) uses software and magnifiers to enhance sight. The Vision Rehabilitation Centre (VRC) helps users to manage their lives as efficiently as possible. The clinic also corrects squint and lazy eye. A squint correction, costs a reasonable Rs 5000.

In Alwar, a team of doctors visits five blocks of the district, identifies people who require surgery and buses them to the hospital, since it is hard to replicate the Operation Theatre's antiseptic conditions. They are returned to their homes, when they are well. Nearly 10 people from Alwar arrive at SCEH every

day, with a slight dip in numbers during summer.

The hospital's reputation has spread by word of mouth. Sometimes, a rickshaw puller drops Rs 10 into the donation box, or patients from Alwar say they would like to make a small contribution. "But it's not mandatory," shrugs Dasgupta.

Instead, a screening service has been started for corporates, to augment revenue. For a fee, which is still lower than what an average executive would pay to a private practitioner, eyes are thoroughly checked. Spectacle frames and contact lenses are marketed. There are also voluntary contributors like a lady from Canada who sent 400 spectacle frames or young volunteers who travel across the world to offer their skills.

e-mail: shantanu@sceh.net

ment and an experienced manager were brought in. Today, a spate of Rotary Clubs and Trusts, fund the hospital. The partnership with Orbis also followed.

Orbis is the world's only flying hospital with a fully equipped teaching facility inside a DC-10 aircraft. An international medical team, jets to troubled spots. They perform eye surgeries and share their skills with doctors in developing countries.

Baby food ban becomes law

Civil Society News

New Delhi

After years of desultory fighting, Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) has won a major victory.

The union government has issued a notification to enforce the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Amendment Bill, 2003. The new amendment strengthens the existing Infant Milk Substitutes Act of 1992.

From 1 November 2003, manufacturers of infant foods are banned from advertising their products. "One more battle has been won in the field of protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in India," says Dr Arun Gupta, National Coordinator, BPNI, "the new bill will remove commercial influence on infant feeding and

result in better health".

The earlier bill had not stopped producers from advertising their wares. Mothers were told, chubby smiling babies emanated from tins of processed food. Infants were promised the "....right eating experience... at the right stage of development".

BPNI reacted and served notices. Baby food manufacturers altered their ad copy, and continued promotions. Even Doordarshan broadcast baby food commercials till BPNI sent a notice in 1999. A new strategy to ensure effective implementation is being seriously discussed at BPNI.

The law prohibits the following:

Promotion of all kinds of foods for babies under the age of two years.

Promotion of infant milk substitutes, infant foods or feeding bottles in any manner including advertising, distribution of samples, donations, using educational

material and offering any kind of benefits to any person.

All forms of advertising including electronic transmission by audio or visual transmission for all products under its scope, that is infant milk substitutes, infant foods or feeding bottles.

Promotion of products under its scope, ie infant milk substitutes, infant foods or feeding bottles by a pharmacy, drug store or chemist shop.

Use of pictures of infants or mothers on the labels of infant milk substitutes or infant foods.

Labeling of infant foods for use before six months

Funding of 'health workers' or an 'association' of health workers for seminars, meetings, conferences, educational courses, contests, fellowships, research work or sponsorship.

Narmada rehab by gram sabhas

Civil Society News
New Delhi/Bhopal

THE chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh, has agreed to involve gram sabhas in the rehabilitation process in the Narmada Valley. The decision was announced after a meeting with Shabana Azmi, MP, LC Jain ex-member Planning Commission, Swami Agnivesh, social activist, and Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) representatives on July 29.

A special government order will be passed enabling gram sabhas to compile the list of people affected by the project and identify agricultural land for rehabilitation. Government documents on land availability and people's entitlements as per the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWD) award will be sent to each gram sabha. The government has acknowledged that adult sons have been left out of the final list of affected persons.

The NWD award provides for land in exchange of land. The Madhya Pradesh government has been offering cash compensation instead. NBA representatives informed the chief minister that the government's special rehabilitation package was insufficient for people to buy five acres as specified under the award. Land offered previously had to be rejected since it was scattered, stony and uncultivable.

The Sardar Sarovar Project has brought water to Kutch, but thousands remain displaced in the Narmada Valley. On 14 May, the Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) Sub-Group for the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) recommended an increase in the height of the dam from 95 metres to 100 metres. The decision will increase the number of people rendered homeless, points out NBA.

The NWD award requires people to be resettled at least one year before the monsoon submerges them and states that they be fully rehabilitated at least six months prior to that date. The Supreme Court ruling of 18 October 2000 makes it clear, the height of the dam can only be increased if construction and rehabilitation make equal progress.

Now the monsoon is in full swing, the water level is 99.75 metres at the dam site and rising every day. "A battle is being waged between villagers, the rising waters and the state," says NBA leader, Medha Patkar. With nowhere to go, people are resisting leaving their flooded homes. In Chimalkhedi village, now an island, the police forcibly evicted 74 people including women, children and two NBA activists.

The situation on submergence is similar in Maharashtra. On June 5, the NBA had withdrawn a 12-day dharna at Nashik following assurances made by the state government.

The Maharashtra government had agreed to

correct land records and resettle people village by village, so that communities would not be torn apart. Villages affected earlier, by the dam, will be moved first. Land acquisition records would also be checked as well as the cut-off date for defining adult sons.

It was agreed that people in marooned villages, should be included in the list of affected persons. The government accepted that a Rehabilitation Planning Committee and Overview Committee would be responsible for implementation and that the dam height would not be increased until these committees gave their approval.

Ongoing rehabilitation efforts by the state governments are being seriously questioned. The Housing and Land Rights Network of Habitat International Coalition (HLRN-HIC) carried out a fact-finding mission in September last.

They found land being rejected because it was rocky and barren. There were disputes over titles to plots. Several sites did not have drinking water or livelihood options. One site, Chikhaldia, was itself going to be submerged. Dana Clark, a team member, works with the International Accountability Project in Berkeley, California. Clark has written to the World Bank stating that the project is subject to the Bank's policy requirements and loan conditions since the loan the Government of India (GOI) took, before it cancelled the remaining

balance in 1993, is still not paid.

Clark has urged the Bank to intervene and ensure the project complies with the terms of the World Bank's resettlement policy, tribal peoples policy and credit and loan agreements. Since the GOI and the states have failed to fulfill their commitments, especially the requirement "to improve or at least regain the standard of living they were enjoying prior to displacement", the Bank has a legal and moral obligation to step in.

Clark has suggested the Bank's Board address the failure of accountability within the bank and tackle the problem of implementation.

In the Narmada case, human costs were never factored. The Bank, she states, has a fiduciary responsibility to step in, engage the Indian government and state governments on abstaining from raising the height of the dam. The Bank has leverage through ongoing irrigation and power sector loans.

Clark has mooted the idea of an independent Development Effectiveness Remedial Team (DERT) of experts including community representatives and those with experience in dealing with development induced displacement. DERT should report directly to the Board. This would be a remedial measure and ensure compliance with the Bank's stated policies.

e-mail: hichrc@ndf.vsnl.net.in

Postal address for the homeless

Civil Society News
New Delhi

When a man without money travels to the city for work, he tends to leave his address behind. His new home is most often the pavement. Even if he writes to his family, they cannot reply. Over the years, he loses touch and sinks into despondency.

A new postal service for homeless people in the capital is reuniting loved ones and dispelling loneliness. Called Begar Sandesh, the service has been started by Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan, a project funded by Action Aid India. Two homeless graduates are hired as postmen to deliver the letters, read them out and write a reply if asked.

Aashray Adhikar runs seven shelters in Delhi's walled city, including one for women. The capital has at least 52,765 people without shelter. About one-third sleep on pavements, parks or rickshaws in the walled city, a bustling traders bazaar. The dilapidated shelters, taken over from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) about a year ago, are now spruced up and cater to 2,500 destitute people.

"When poor people migrate to the city they lose their identity and sense of self worth," says Paramjeet Kaur, director of Aashray Adhikar. "they have no community support or relationships and they don't trust anybody." For rickshaw pullers and porters, every day is a struggle for survival. The isolation which follows can have long lasting effects on mental stability, says Paramjeet.

Aashray Adhikar first issued identity cards to every person so that the police stops harassing them as vagrants. The homeless requested a postal service. Some of them had not been in touch with their families for some 10 or 20 years.

So in December 2002, Aashray Adhikar



Paramjeet Kaur and her team: All smiles

applied for a postbox to the postmaster at Malkaganj in North Delhi. After the usual bureaucratic wrangling, Rs 200 was deposited and postbox number 2210 was launched on May 2003. About 150 men are members and between five and seven letters arrive every week.

The postmen collect the letters from the post-office on alternative days. Contact points have been established at New Delhi Railway station and Arambagh, in the walled city area.

After 12 years, Sharafat Ali Khan wrote to his relatives in Sitamarhi, Bihar. His excited family sent his brother to bring him back. At the age of 15, Khan had run away to Delhi. He got a job washing horses for tongawallas in the walled city.



The postmen: Vohra and Uday

"Since we read the letters, we are privy to intimate details about our clients," says Vohra, "they become our relatives and we even give them advice on family matters".

The problem is back home nobody understands a migrant worker earns so little, he can hardly feed himself. He can't go back home because he cannot afford the train fare.

But the family thinks he is making good money and should send them frequent money orders, says Uday. The postmen also advice people on their health. Both topped a training programme for health workers last year.

Uday is from Kerala and Vohra from Assam. Vohra came from a village near Guwahati in 1989 when he was 15. He says he wanted to serve the country by joining the army. But he was rejected and found himself in the city without money. For a while he was employed with a private company, but that closed down. He was left with no choice but to work as a labourer in the walled city.

Uday came from Kannur district about 10 years ago. He had given money to an agent who promised to send him to Saudi Arabia. When he arrived the agent had disappeared. So Uday was stranded, without any friends. He did not even know Hindi. A person from Andhra Pradesh befriended him and got him work as a cart-puller.

Aashray Adhikar has started a computer centre. Twenty people are being trained. Talks are on with NIIT and Aptech to award certificates. Other homeless men were keen to learn how to read and write their letters so there are evening literacy classes. A library with story books and magazines is keeping their minds busy.

The postal service is for adult male workers. Homeless women were not very interested, says Paramjeet. "Most women without shelter have been abandoned by their families. They are not very keen to inform relatives about their condition," she points out.

The men say the shelter is a home and its inmates are their new relatives. Money has been collected for a clock and the walls are full of notices. "Naturally we'd like to visit our villages, but now we have an address in the city," they say.

e-mail: homeless@vsnl.net

CAN LINKING OF RIVERS BE AN ANSWER?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

OPPPOSITION is mounting to the government's elaborate plan to link rivers. A group of eminent citizens has written to the Prime Minister expressing their serious reservations. Scientists too, are advising caution, saying interlinking is impractical, even dangerous. Several state governments are opposed to the scheme. Across the border, Nepali groups have voiced concern, while Bangladesh is contemplating an appeal to the UN.

The proposal to link rivers seems to have come out of the blue. A petition before the Supreme Court prompted the court to suggest that the government consider the proposal. The union government set itself a deadline of end 2016. The Prime Minister grouped a Task Force, saying implementation would be on a "war footing". The Task Force, under former Union power minister Suresh Prabhu, has formed five sub-groups to examine social issues, ecology, economic viability, engineering and international dimensions of the elaborate plan.

According to the government, the working figure for the project would be Rs 5,600 billion. This implies the government will have to find Rs 400 billion every year for the next decade to meet the costs of the project.

The Tenth Plan, despite its emphasis on water, does not even mention river linking. In fact, the Prime Minister in his address to the National Water Resources Council on April 2002, urged promotion of community-led rainwater harvesting and watershed development. Yet, till date the government has not assessed the potential of rainwater harvesting in a single basin.

The proposal originates from the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), set up in 1982. India's first National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development (NCI-WRDP) had examined inter-basin transfers and concluded "... there seems to be no imperative necessity for massive water transfers".

The Commission stated the environmental and economic costs of linking rivers would be huge and that irrigating desert areas of Rajasthan required detailed studies. It was only in the Cauvery and Vaigai basins that a limited transfer of water from the Godavari was deemed desirable.

By linking river basins the government hopes to transfer water from "surplus" rivers in the east to "deficit" regions in south, central and western India. Officials reiterate the benefits of mega projects: drought mitigation, flood control, hydroelectricity and so on.

The project has an Himalayan component and a Peninsula one. A maze of canals will link the Ganga to smaller tributaries and to the Brahmaputra. The Ganga will be connected to the Mahanadi. In the south, water from the Mahanadi and Godavari will be transferred to the Cauvery and Vaigai. (see map for details). West flowing rivers will be diverted east-

wards. The plan will partially alter the flow of rivers into the Arabian Sea and connect them with rivers surging into the Bay of Bengal.

"Rivers are not pipelines to be cut, turned around and welded. They are natural phenomena, integral ecological systems, and inextricable parts of the cultural, economic, social lives of the communities concerned," says Himanshu Thakkar of South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP).

Water specialists question whether

likely impact on habitat and environment".

Dams and canals will be built. Water will have to be carried between river basins by tunneling or lifting, through a circuitous route, bypassing mountains, rivers and streams. The government says water flows will be determined by gravity with a few lifts at strategic points. Experts doubt it. Officials claim 34,000 MW of hydropower will be generated but Thakkar points out the project will require huge energy costs and heavy capital investment.

The government says this engineering feat will transfer 1500 cubic m of water per second from surplus rivers to deficit ones. But according to official estimates, during the monsoons, floodwaters in the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Godavari add up to 30,000 cubic m. This mismatch indicates that the inter-linking plan is incapable of solving the flood problem.

"Flood control" is an archaic concept, in any case. Environmental scientists largely agree living with floods is the best option. It is also a misconception that water which flows into the sea goes waste. Flowing rivers move silt and nutrients to the plains, deltaic regions and mangrove areas. Plans to divert river water may dry out the Sunderbans, the world's largest coastal forest.

It is debatable whether water transfers will boost agriculture in arid and rain-fed areas. India has the largest irrigation infrastructure in the world, but its highest achieved irrigation efficiency is only 35%. An improvement of 10% would spread irrigation to 14 million hectares. Bringing in more water might encourage wastage and discourage farmers from changing cropping patterns or switching to less water intensive crops.

Transporting water to arid regions requires careful research. The government took water to Rajasthan by building the Indira Gandhi canal. "It has been constructed in an area, called Lunkaran Sar, famous for salt deposits and can only end up waterlogged", says Anupam Mishra, water activist and director of Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi.

The project will augment water in areas around rivers which are being serviced, anyway. Drinking water needs are incidental. The answer to drought, as projects in Alwar, Ralegan Siddhi and many others have shown, is in local watershed schemes and rainwater harvesting. Per capita income in Ralegan Siddhi has increased from Rs 2,700 per annum to Rs 48,000, which is three times the national average.

Before going ahead, projects have to undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment, and a rigorous cost-benefit analysis. But the river link project has been announced, prior to an evaluation. Concerned experts fear government agencies undertaking these tasks will be under pressure to be "positive". The NWDA, it is believed, has prepared feasibility studies for eight links, ratified by engineers, economists and sociologists. Thakkar points out these should be placed before the public for an informed debate.

e-mail: cwaterp@vsnl.com

CONTROVERSY



Suresh Prabhu: In the hot seat

The solution to drought, as projects in Alwar, Ralegan Siddhi and many others have shown, is in local watershed schemes

any river in India has surplus water.

"Estimates of surplus water made by central agencies like the NWDA are hotly contested by states," says Professor A Vaidyanathan, Emeritus Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies. The states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh disagree there is any extra water in the Mahanadi and Godavari basins. The tussle between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over water-sharing is well known. River linking may spark a new round of water wars, say experts.

The demand for water is in the dry season. But rivers overflow mainly during the monsoons. For instance, over 80% of the annual flow in the Kosi river is between May and November and nearly three-fourths amid June and October. "It is not enough to merely transport water," says Vaidyanathan, "if there is a push for building large storages, we would need to know the quantum of water to be stored and the

A people's housing policy for Delhi

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A Peoples' Housing Policy has been drawn up by Sajha Manch, a coalition of 40 groups working for slum dwellers in Delhi. Representatives from slum clusters, unauthorised colonies, resettlement colonies and professional groups participated in the research. Sajha Manch collected data from government records and the communities.

The capital has about 1,100 slum clusters with an estimated population of 30 lakhs. Nearly 75% of the city's population lives in sub-standard settlements. Density in slum clusters has increased by six times in the last 25 years. Delhi invests about three times more per capita than its neighboring states and therefore provides more employment.

The policy document states that 90% of people living in slum settlements build their own huts. The cost of construction varies between Rs 20,000 to Rs 40,000. Data from 1600 households in 13 jhuggi jhonpri clusters reveals over two-third of the people surveyed had small families and were young and educated. They depended on hand pumps for water, public latrines for sanitation and went to private doctors for treatment.

This working population forms the backbone of the city's economy. Over one-third of the households, reported more than one working member. Most were in service jobs or worked as daily wagers, earning less than Rs 2000 per month. They traveled on foot or used bicycles. Less than one-fifth had electricity or gas cylinders for cooking and only 3% had access to sewerage.

Since 1990 the Jhuggi Jhonpri (JJ) Department of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has resorted to environmental improvement of slums, in-situ upgradation or relocation to deal with the slum situation.

Environmental improvement includes providing water, toilets, drainage and pavements but excludes primary schools, dispensaries, roads, street lighting and parks. Only 23% of the total budget allocated has been spent on environmental improvement. Less than half do not have water and sanitation.

In situ upgradation involves realignment of plots and widening of roads. A no-objection certificate by the land owning agency is required and often hard to get. About 75% of the budget has been allocated to in situ upgradation. But it is five times more expensive than environmental improvement so at best only 1.7% of existing jhuggis can be upgraded.

Relocation is resorted to if the land owning agency wants the land to carry out projects of public importance and agrees to contribute Rs 29,000 per jhuggi towards the cost of relocation. The Delhi government contributes Rs 10,000 and the jhuggi dweller pays Rs 7000. Only jhuggi families who have a ration card dated before 31.1.90 can be provided with 18 sq mt of land with 7sq mt open space. Families who settled after 1990 are given only 12.5 sq mt and the land owning agency pays Rs 20,000 for relocation. In 10 years the department claims to have relocated 22,215 jhuggis to the fringes of the city.

In the last 20 years the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) has fulfilled only 34% of its housing target, mostly to the middle class. The policy document questions claims by the authorities that land for settlement is not available. Less than 2% of land has been "encroached" by slum clusters. The People's Housing Policy recommends the government:

1. Locate slum dwellers on residential land within a one-kilometre radius of their existing slum.
2. Allot a plot of 50 sq. m. to each family on leasehold basis on payment of a fee not exceeding Rs 10,000 per plot.
3. Provide basic urban services at the rate of Rs 200 per sq.mt.
4. Provide services through public agencies, according to realistic urban norms.
5. Charge fees for supply of services on a monthly basis as per public policy.
6. Make available housing loans of up to Rs 50,000.

The document costs Rs 50 and interested readers may contact: haz_cen@vsnl.net



THE RIGHT TO KNOW

Civil Society reports on how Parivartan, a young organisation, is trying to speed up development and bring change by implementing the Right to Information Act in Delhi

TILL two years ago, what Sundernagari knew about itself it preferred to forget. A squalid and dilapidated neighbourhood in the festering eastern fringes of Delhi, the area had for long lived with broken roads, open drains, erratic power supply, garbage dumps and disease. If any hope existed among Sundernagari's residents, it was that one day they could escape its hellish conditions. It was much too much to think that things could get better — that sewers could be laid, roads fixed, corrupt municipal officials brought to book.

But that was two years ago, when a short young man called Arvind Kejriwal turned up from nowhere. He came with Panini Anand. They called themselves Parivartan and brought with them the message that change was possible if the residents of Sundernagari learned to use an enormously powerful weapon: the Right to Information Act.

Arvind, 35, is an income-tax officer on leave from his job in the government. Anand, 21, is a talented street performer with a degree in mass communications. There are five others who work full-time for Parivartan and many others who pitch in as volunteers. Together they have tried to show the residents of Sundernagari how to intervene in the process of local governance.

Residents, who had once surrendered to the filth of their surroundings, now ask for development. They insist on knowing why a road has not been properly paved or why water pumps have not been installed. It amazes them that officials, whom they couldn't even speak to earlier, can now be made to open up municipal books to show how money has been spent.

"Sundernagari is a laboratory for an experiment in people's democracy which we will replicate elsewhere," says Arvind. "Accountability is not merely demanded. It has to be got out of the government. People need to be literate, aware and participate in governance."

Parivartan's activists first educated people about their right to information and democracy. They walked through Sundernagari's narrow lanes, singing their messages to the beat of drums. People stood around and listened.

"From birth to death you pay taxes to the government," Anand told them. "You buy medicines, you pay a tax. When you buy food, you pay tax. You pay taxes all the time. It's your money. So why don't you ask the government how your money

is being spent?" Government officials are the servants of the people, explained Arvind. "They get salaries from the taxes people pay. We are their masters and can question their actions."

The Delhi Right to Information Act is perhaps one of the bureaucracy's most zealously guarded secrets. The State Assembly passed the Act two years ago, but were it not for Parivartan no one might have heard of it. It is a hugely effective weapon and easy to use. All a citizen has to do is fill up a form asking for information and hand it over to the department concerned.

An answer has to come in three weeks. If there is no response or the request is rejected, the citizen can go to the public grievances commission, which serves as the appellate authority. Thereafter, both the citizen and the government can go to the high court, but the court cannot reverse the commission's decision unless it is proved that the commission acted with bias.

For every day of delay in providing information, an officer is liable to a fine of Rs 50. This is a landmark provision because, perhaps for the first time in the country, it fixes a monetary penalty for a government officer failing to do his or her duty. But putting the law into practice is tough. The reality is, this penalty clause has been kept in abeyance for undefined procedural reasons. The bureaucracy has clearly struck back.

In Sundernagari, Parivartan has shown people how to use the Act to get information about basic development work. It has applied the Act to ask for details about tenders and inspection reports. One ongoing battle is about the quality of material utilized for paving a road. A resident has asked the municipality to provide a sample of the material used to pave a lane, so that it can be sent to a laboratory to determine whether the aggregate is of the correct specifications.

In December last year, a Jan Sunwai or public hearing was held in Sundernagari. At this hearing people spoke of work, which had either not been done at all, or left incomplete. In each case the municipal books showed the work as having been completed and payments made to contractors.

But more important than the public hearing, were its preparations. The public hearing could only be a success if local people participated and were convinced of what Parivartan was doing. Momentum was needed and Parivartan's call had to go

The urban activist

What drives Arvind Kejriwal, 35, with a comfortable job in the Indian Revenue Service, to campaign in the streets for transparent governance? It is certainly not money because Parivartan gets to see very little of it. It could well be fame, but when you get to know Arvind, you realise it is not that either. He is a determined man, but terribly self-effacing.

Arvind cannot explain why he does what he does in Sundernagari. Or why he prefers to turn his back on a job as an income-tax officer, in favour of a life on the streets. He just does it.

A graduate from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) at Kharagpur, Arvind's first job was with the Tatas at Jamshedpur. It was a cushy one. It was from here that he took the exams for joining the government and landed in the revenue service.

He married a batch mate. His wife is still a serving income-tax officer. They have two children and live in a flat in Ghaziabad. Arvind travels mostly by bus.

Since the government allows an officer to go on study leave, Arvind has managed to draw his salary for the past two years. If he wants to continue, he has to take secondment to an NGO which will pay him. Arvind's choice is the Centre for Equity Studies headed by Shekhar Singh.

The Parivartan team (see picture) has been cobbled together as the NGO has gone along. They take a subsistence allowance but no salary. Team members have their own reasons for working with Parivartan, but they are there because they got hooked on to the work.

None of them are very highly educated. But they could earn much more doing something else. Two of them live in Sundernagari and one in nearby Seemapuri.

Panini Anand, 21, graduated from the Institute of Mass Communications (IMC) last year. He is paid Rs 5000 a month. If he were to pursue a career as a journalist, either in print or on television, he could earn much more. But Anand is a talented street performer and knows how to dramatise complex messages so that they make sense to ordinary people.

Rajiv Sharma, 30, has passed Class 12. He has a good understanding of how the law works in every day life. He earns Rs 4000 a month. **Chander, 27**, a graduate lives in Mayur Vihar in east Delhi. He used to work in a doctor's clinic. Chander is paid Rs 4000 by Parivartan. **Rekha Kohli, 22**, a graduate, used to stay in Sundernagari. She gets Rs 3000. **Lata Sharma, 23**, also a graduate lives in Yamuna Vihar. Rajiv brought her along. She earns Rs 3000.

"Parivartan is funded from donations made by people," says Arvind. "We do not believe in institutional funding. If the people we work for do not need us around, we have no business being there".

beyond slogans and street corner meetings.

It was here that the Right to Information Act played a crucial role. Through a series of applications asking for information, Parivartan managed to obtain copies of all the civil works undertaken by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) in the past two financial years in Sundernagari and Seemapuri.

This information was broken up for 11 blocks of Sundernagari and seven blocks of Seemapuri. Parivartan volunteers then went to each block and compared municipal claims with reality. They involved local people in this exercise so that they could see how money was being siphoned off. Street corner meetings were held, public anger was expressed and in this manner the stage was set for the Jan Sunwai held in December 2002.

More than a thousand people living in the area, turned up. Local municipal officials were present to answer questions. Parivartan was helped by the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) and the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). Both organisations have experience in organising campaigns for transparency.

Observers were invited. They were: Justice PB Sawant, Aruna Roy, Prabhaskar Joshi, Vinod Mehta, Bharat Dogra, Shekhar Singh, Arundhati Roy and Harsh Mander.

The Jan Sunwai made public all kinds of information about development work in the area:

HANDPUMPS: LOSS Rs 785,965

Twenty-nine hand pumps with electric motors were supposed to have been installed. In reality only 14 hand pumps

How a Jan Sunwai works

A Jan Sunwai or public hearing enables the citizen to assess the work done by the government. It allows for inspection of government records of expenditure and comparison of these with work shown as completed.

Such hearings have been used in rural Rajasthan by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) since 1994-95 to increase the participation of ordinary people in the process of governance. This has greatly empowered local

communities and it has been seen that levels of corruption have come down.

A Jan Sunwai must be preceded by an assessment of the records of the government. Details from these records have to be collated, analysed and presented to the people in an understandable form.

At the Jan Sunwai, the details of vouchers, tenders, muster rolls, specifications of work undertaken are read out to the people who gather. Any

one present, including government officials and political representatives, is free to give evidence in support of or against the information being presented.

It is emphasized that people only comment on those issues on which they have personal direct knowledge. Inspections are also carried out either before, during or after the Jan Sunwai along with officials.

A Jan Sunwai is a people's analysis of government records. As a matter of

principle it is organized only when the local population asks for it.

An independent panel is invited to participate in the proceedings so as to encourage objectivity and fair play. The panel files a report on the proceedings.

The purpose of a Jan Sunwai is to bring down walls of mistrust. To that extent it is necessary that government officials, politicians and other players are involved and also get the credit for improving the system.



SCENES FROM A FILM: Parivartan's campaign in the streets of Sundernagari was easily the most challenging part of the NGO's work. It meant reaching out to people in a language which they understood.

A little help from



Parivartan's transparency campaign owes much to the Congress government under Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit. The bureaucracy may be difficult to convince, but Dikshit has shown a commitment to transparency. In her five years in power, she has reached out to the citizens of Delhi.

Dikshit piloted the Bhagidari system, which involves citizens in governance. Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) are helped to coordinate with the administration. The bureaucracy has been

directed to listen to the RWAs.

Much remains to be done, but expectations have been raised. Her government passed the Right to Information Act. Implementing the Act may be difficult, but the government cannot be accused of not trying. The council for the Act consists of independent members. Dikshit invests time in knowing how the Act is being put into practice.

When Arvind drew a blank with the food commissioner, it wasn't too tough for him to get an hour-long appointment with the chief minister along with other members of the council. Dikshit went into details at this meeting, making it clear that she respected efforts such as Parivartan's.

Dikshit's government holds regular meetings between resident associations and officials. The structures of these meetings are far from perfect. Officials continue to have the upper hand. Perhaps not much gets done. But residents do get a hearing. They list their problems and ask for action.

The right to information campaign and the Bhagidari system intersect well. Resident Welfare Associations have much left to deliver, but people already see themselves driving solutions to Delhi's problems. At a meeting Arvind held with these associations recently, people were very interested in knowing how they could use the Right to Information Act elsewhere in Delhi.

As Delhi goes to the polls in a few months from now, Dikshit naturally hopes to draw much mileage out of her image as a chief minister who believes in less government.

had been fitted. Not a single one had an electric motor.

IRON GRATINGS: LOSS Rs 730,952

When a new street is made it is supposed to have new iron gratings on the drains going across the street. Out of a total of 253 iron gratings weighing 27,557 kg only 30 weighing 3136 kg were installed.

NEW DRAINS: LOSS Rs 1,385,175

When a new street is constructed drains on both sides are to be demolished and made afresh. It was found either no work had been done or a single brick was used to raise the level of the existing gutters. But payments for the new drains had been made fully.

STREET THICKNESS: LOSS Rs 833,935

Streets are to be lined with a concrete layer of 10 cm thickness. Digging showed, in most cases, the layer was just 5 cm.

MISSING STREETS: LOSS Rs 1,292,398

Several streets were found to exist only on paper. Not only were the streets non-existent, the payments for work, claimed to have been done, were clearly excessive.

What effect has this onslaught had on the municipal authorities? The initial reaction was of resistance. But as pressure built up, the authorities caved in. After the Jan Sunwai, there was further compliance and willingness to institutionalise some measure of transparency.

Three important steps have been agreed upon:

1. Every work site will have a board displaying the nature of the work, name of the contractor, money to be paid and dates for start and completion.
2. Every division office of the municipal

body will display work completed in the past quarter.

3. The details of all ongoing work will be put up at municipal stores.

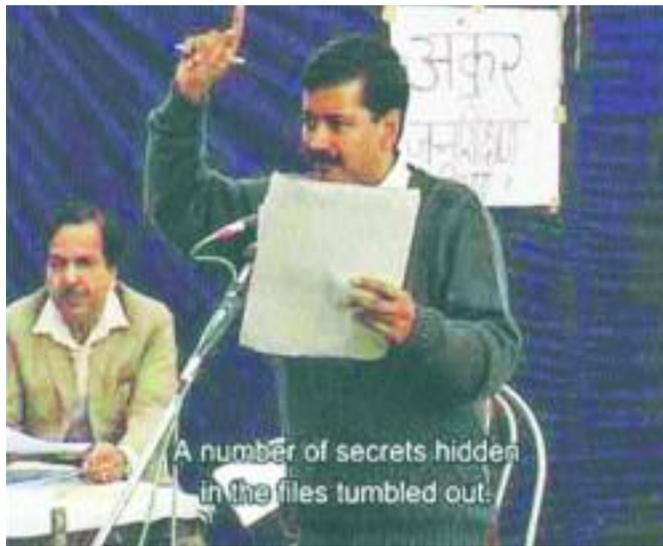
This is an achievement, but it seems to be in response to Parivartan's shock treatment, rather than to any long-term commitment to transparent governance.

Close on the heels of the concessions, entrenched interests began working against Parivartan. Recently an executive engineer went to the police with a complaint that Parivartan was disrupting the municipal authority's work in the area.

Municipal contracts usually see a convergence of interests involving local politicians, the police and municipal authorities. This particular complaint resulted in policemen making several rounds to Rajiv's house. Rajiv lives in Seemapuri and works full-time for Parivartan. In his area, police visits can be menacing. Rajiv has no special clout and is a resident like any other. He has a small house, a tenant and gets Rs 4000 a month from Parivartan to meet his expenses. Finally, he and Arvind had to spend several hours at Nandnagari police station, answering questions and filing explanations before being let off with a warning, which sounded more like a threat. "I'm not as decent as I look," the police sub-inspector said to them.

Things are no better at the office of the food commissioner, Sumati Mehta, who has been asked for the records of ration shops in Sundernagari, under the Right to Information Act. People know that traders take away food meant for them. The records of the ration shops are

"Parivartan is entirely funded by donations from the people it serves. It does not believe in external funding. If the people we serve do not need us around, we have no business being around," says Arvind.



A megaphone served as the most potent weapon. Anand's (with a beard in the pictures above) talents as a street performer proved to be invaluable. And the slogan "Kahan gya hamara paisa" was the big draw

How to use the Delhi law

This is how you can use the Right to Information Act in Delhi.

1. 119 Departments of the Delhi state government have been brought under the purview of the Act. In each department, one officer has been designated as the competent authority under the Act to accept the request forms and to provide the information sought by the people.
2. Any person seeking information under the Act can file an application in Form-A. Forms are available free of cost with the designated officer in each department.
3. A normal application fee of Rs 50 per application is charged for supply of information other than the information relating to tenders and contracts. For tenders and contracts the fee is Rs 500. In addition Rs 5 a page is charged for copies of documents.
4. You can expect the information you seek in 15 days or a maximum of 30 days.
5. In case you fail to get a response within 30 days, you can go to the Public Grievance Commission.
6. In case you win your appeal, expect the information within the next 30 days.
7. If the information provided is false, the official supplying it is liable to pay a penalty of Rs 1000 per application.
8. If information is not provided and the application is also not rejected, the official is required to pay a penalty of Rs 50 a day up to a maximum of Rs 500 per application. This has not yet been implemented in Delhi.

fudged to do this.

Parivartan has got individuals to file applications asking for these records. The food commissioner has little sympathy for Parivartan's cause though the government stands committed to the right to information. As the commissioner prevaricates, despite an order from the public grievances commission, the traders get the time they need to slip the matter into the high court.

Parivartan, therefore, barely seems to end one encounter before it begins another. But they keep on trying.

Arvind's role as an activist began at the offices of the erstwhile Delhi Vidyut Board (DVB), which was known for the corruption of its staff. Getting a bill checked or a cable replaced or a connection restored meant greasing palms. DVB offices were known for their touts who could get things done at a price.

Arvind decided to be a different kind of



Photo: LAKSHMAN ANAND

tout. He put up a board and table and told DVB consumers he would help them if they didn't pay bribes. He showed them how filling up a form under the Right to Information Act was very effective. Billing

problems, which had been lingering for months, were easily cracked. Most often, corrupt staff merely wanted the applicant to go away and deal with the case speedily.

Privatisation changed the situation at DVB. It was broken into separate corporations with the Tatas and Reliance taking over distribution. With this many of the old problems would melt away over time. Billing, complaints etc would become more transparent.

It was then that Arvind moved to Sundernagari, hoping to achieve transparent governance, not among urban elites, but among the poor and disadvantaged. In March 2002, Arvind came into contact with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which had been campaigning on the right to information in Rajasthan.

Parivartan now draws sustenance from the experience of MKSS. The Jan Sunwai model has been used very effectively for the rural poor in Rajasthan.

Strong laws, weak laws

Right to information laws exists in eight states. These are Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Assam, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh. The Union Government has also passed Central legislation, but it is yet to be notified.

Three clauses are considered crucial for making the law work. Also a quick comparison of the different laws in the states and at the Centre.

1. Penalty clause: If information is not provided in time or if the information provided is false, there should be a provision for imposing penalty on the guilty officials. Tamil Nadu and the Central law do not have penalty provisions.

2. Exemptions: The number of areas exempted from the purview of the law should be as few as possible. The Central law fails miserably on this account. Laws in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan also full of exclusions.

3. Appeals: An independent appellate mechanism is needed if information is not provided in time or if the

applicant is not satisfied with the information received. The Central law does not provide for an independent appellate machinery. In the Central law, the appeal lies with the immediate superior of the guilty official. Laws in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan also do not provide for independent appellate mechanism.

The Delhi, Goa, Maharashtra and Karnataka laws are effective laws. They provide for a penalty, cover most areas of governance and have an independent appellate mechanism.

But the fees in Delhi are very high and low everywhere else.

In Delhi, it is Rs 500 per application seeking contract-related information. Parivartan, for instance, paid around Rs 13,000 for contracts pertaining to municipal work in Sundernagari and Seemapuri. Such fees could be beyond the pocket most individuals.

In comparison to Delhi's Rs 500, an application elsewhere can be moved for as little as Rs 5.

BRAC rebuilds in Afghanistan

Dr. Sonya M. Sultan

A Bangladeshi NGO's unobtrusive presence is making an important difference in Afghanistan. It has initiated several community-based schemes and will draw up a national plan for micro-finance to help poor rural households.

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has few funds, but goes to Afghanistan in May 2002, with expertise. It is familiar with the problems of public health, employment and education among extremely poor communities. It also has Islamic sensitivities.

BRAC's approach is low-key, but it has been quick to put an organizational structure in place. It has 158 staff members, 87% of whom are Afghans, working out of 17 offices in four provinces and Kabul. They operate 10 health centers, 24 schools in Jabal-e-Seraj and Mazar-e-Sherif, and a training center that offers courses in citizen organisation management, gender, and development management.

BRAC's micro-finance programme is functioning in 378 rural villages with 9,947 members, all women whose average loan amount is \$80. In Kabul, BRAC's Micro Enterprise Lending and Assistance program disburses loans to men. Altogether, BRAC-Afghanistan's loans total US\$471,381 and the repayment rate is 100 percent.

This is no small achievement in Afghanistan, where "there is a sort of pall, a paralysis, obfuscating the future," according to Peter Tomsen, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan in testimony to Congress last month. "Concrete project implementation is delayed and feeble."

BRAC's work in Bangladesh gives it a distinct advantage. Their health programme covers 30 million people, more than the population of Afghanistan. Through years of experience, the NGO has found a balance between challenging existing discriminatory practices in society

without appearing to be insensitive to local norms.

In Afghanistan, the mortality rate infants and children under five are 165 and 257 per thousand live births, one of the highest in the world. There is just one medical doctor for every 50,000 people, in rural areas. The dictates of purdah restrict mobility so severely that many women and children never get access to medical facilities.

BRAC has set up mobile health clinics that are partly managed by women health volunteers from the community. The emphasis is on preventive health. Each volunteer is responsible for 200 households. She provides services in nutrition, maternity care, family planning, immunisation, tuberculosis, water and sanitation.

The current adult literacy rate is less than 25 % for males, and less than 10 % for females. Schools are often housed in a tent or under a tree and have few books, no furniture or drinking water for the students. BRAC has set up 24 primary schools in the provinces of Parwan and Balkh to educate girls between the ages of 11 to 15. These schools are located in villages with the lowest school enrollment rates.

Parents decide how these schools will function and the curricula. A parent-teacher committee chooses location and timings.

BRAC had to seek male consent before starting micro-finance groups for women. Staff from Bangladesh and Afghanistan explained how an entire family would benefit from a women's involvement in income-generating activities.

Koranic law forbids charging interest. However, when BRAC explained that the money charged in addition to loan capital is an administrative cost and not used for profit, people were willing to pay. This is a major breakthrough for the micro-finance sector in Afghanistan.

*e-mail: public-affairs@brac.net
Dr. Sonya M. Sultan, Social Development Adviser, UK Department for International Development, Policy Division, London.*

A final statute amid a summer break

HAVING spent the better part of the last two decades in workaholic America I watched with great fascination as Europe impatiently prepared for its annual summer ritual of rest and recreation; while competing with the unmatched glamour of the Iraq war – should I say post-War, considering the American President had definitively declared victory sometime in late spring – a momentous event was taking place in Europe, almost unnoticed by the rest of the world. The 220-page draft constitution of the EU was finalised and presented by its author, the 77-year-old conservative Chairman of the European convention, the former President of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Perhaps, the long political and bureaucratic journey that had started in 1957 as the original EEC, had robbed this historic moment of its grandeur and significance.

For the Europeans the significance was lost because the reality of the changes that this document implies is already a fact of life. As for the rest of the world, I think the significance will gradually seep in as they themselves evolve to this higher political and social plane. What exactly does the European Union (EU) mean? To the Europeans it means (or has meant for a while now) the end of centuries of war and destruction. It means a political transition from the world of nation-states that was created by the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) to that of continental states, it being the first. It means creating an order that is transparent, and includes first and foremost, the rule of law. The Law itself is based on Human rights, liberty, democracy and human dignity. Its citizen's rights are set down in a charter. It aims to promote peace, equality and the well being of its citizens. It means distilling the humanity and goodness at the core of each religion without succumbing to the chauvinistic inclusion of any one (Spain, Portugal, Poland and Italy insisted on including the mention of Christianity). On a grander note it means a single market of 450 million people with a single currency that is certainly going to replace the dollar as the currency. It means a unified foreign policy, defense and a pursuit of international law that will be able to stand up to the USA – eventually, I hope.

Competing with the heat of the occupation in Iraq was the heat on the ground and in the air as tens of thousands of Europeans died and hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest were burned to cinders in Southern Europe this summer. Never the ones to compromise their *qualité de vie*, the Europeans continued their summer rituals and the heat didn't deter even the grueling plus-2200 kilometer Tour de France. Even as the heat wave shriveled up the fruits and vegetables the wine growers forecast that this would be the best year for wine in a long time. Only in one little Island across the channel was the public more interested in a political scandal that

is gathering momentum on a daily basis and promises to end with a big bang. The Blair government has been accused of "sexing" up the intelligence dossier on Iraq, last September, to make the war on Iraq more acceptable to the British people by none other than the great British institution, BBC. Other Europeans credit this summertime distraction to the Anglo-Saxon eccentricity – imagine taking time away from their sacred vacation for some silly political scandal, say the French. *Sacre Bleu!*

The British public however, is watching this great drama – now serialised as the Hutton Inquiry – as though it were an Agatha Christie whodunit, suicide (or murder) and all. Considering the same public largely opposed the Iraq War, there is an I-told-you-so aspect to it that makes it all the more attractive. Heads are already rolling and the government may fall. The rest of the Europeans (always suspicious of the Brits not being really a part of the family) feel that this might finally bring

them to their senses and give up their nostalgic longing for the Empire and seeking it vicariously through their Anglo-Saxon cousins across the Atlantic. In real terms they don't really have that much time to make up their mind about joining the Euro-family. In the future you cannot be a part of the Union without adopting the Euro. As Polly Toynbee of the Guardian wrote at the eve of the War how Blair had lost a great opportunity to enter the annals of history- and of the EU, by the simple act of joining France and Germany in opposing the US and the War. Perhaps history will present that opportunity again, to his successor.

After long years of conditioning to time-is-money as the bottom-line mantra of the American worship of the mammon, it is a little bewildering but certainly refreshing to be confronted with the a totally different interpretation of the right to the pursuit of happiness of the French. I can now drive in search of that single altruistic boulanger who choose to sacrifice his August so that his neighborhood may continue to have their daily baguette because all his fellow bakers have closed shop for the whole month and are to be found scattered around the various vacation retreats around the country. It's true of-course that there aren't many French souls braving the company of the marauding hordes of foreign tourists that descend on Versailles each summer. They scurry away like deer at the approach of a predator. I can now drive around in quest of my brown wheat bread because the mayor of Versailles (and most French Towns) has made parking free in August. America seems a distant memory as I walk into my empty apartment satisfied with being able to find my particular baguette complet and not having had to compromise simply because it's August. My wife and children are vacationing in the Swiss Alps while I stayed back to do a special summer course. She of course, is French!



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Chinese consumers reject GM food

By Anuradha Mittal,

THIRTY two Chinese companies, with 53 brand names, sent formal statements to Greenpeace in July, confirming that they do not use genetically modified (GM) ingredients in their products. Among them are a large soy sauce producer in Southern China, and a major soymilk brand, Vitasoy. International brands such as Wyeth, Mead Johnson, Wrigley and Lipton, made similar assurances.

China's new policy, introduced in March this year, aims to keep soya production in Northeast China GM-free. Soya is a food staple in the country. Not only is China the world's fourth largest soya producer, it is also the center of origin for soya beans, so the impact of GM soya on biodiversity could be immense. The country imports 50% of its soya, mainly from the US, Brazil and Argentina. A large portion of this is genetically engineered.

While Bt cotton has been commercialised in China, the government has been much more cautious about GM food crops. China's labeling regulations stipulate that all products containing GM ingredients, including seeds, animal feed and food products, should be clearly marked.

The labelling regulation is not a stand-alone law, but part of China's broader framework of 'Biosafety Regulation of GMOs in Agriculture', originally announced in June 2001. According to this framework, environmental release of GMOs must be approved by relevant authorities. The government has recently stepped up enforcement, and emphasised that producers selling unlabelled GM products would be penalised.

The assurances of the 32 companies is in sharp contrast to the record of Nestlé. The Swiss food giant came under fire for allegedly selling products containing GM ingredients without appropriate labeling, in contravention of domestic law. Six prod-

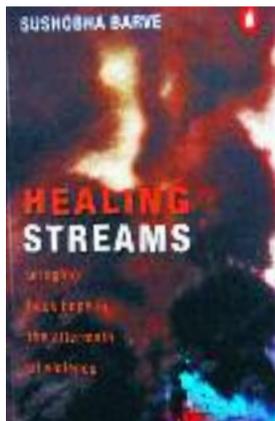
ucts from Nestlé, including snacks, chocolate confectionery and milk powder, were found to contain unlabelled GM ingredients.

Consumer reaction was swift. One web poll on China's largest website, recorded 5 000 people signing up in just two days, 99% against Nestlé's actions. Newspapers reported Chinese consumers returning products to Nestlé's offices.

Consumer pressure has played a part in gradually sidelining GM foods from the market. With the exception of Nestlé's Pak Fook Fresh Soya Milk and Beancurd Dessert, and Hong Chi's Yung Ho Soya Milk, quantities of GM ingredients in common food-stuffs tested by the Consumer Council were substantially lower than those in a similar test three years ago. Out of 26 products sampled, 12 contained GM soya. No GM maize or GM potato varieties were detected. Tests three years earlier had shown GM soya levels between 10 and 30% and GM maize up to 9%.

Lim Li Ching www.i-sis.org.uk

Mohalla balm in Mumbai



Healing Streams
Author: Sushobha Barve
Publisher: Penguin
Price: Rs 295

By Rita Anand

ON 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi was shot dead by one of her bodyguards, a Sikh. The incident sparked horrific violence against the community in India.

On that fateful day the author Sushobha Barve and a colleague were on a train from Mumbai to Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh. Barve watched in horror as two of her co-passengers were beaten, thrown out of the train and then burnt live. Completely shaken, she devoted herself to preventing violence and helping traumatised victims piece their lives together.

The book is not an academic exercise. It is an eyewitness account of the anatomy of riots, their devastating impact and a method which worked. There are not only stories of bitterness and despair but also of great courage by ordinary people.

In October 1989, Barve's mission took her to Bhagalpur where communal carnage had taken place after the shilanya yatra organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Seva Sangh (RSS) as part of the Ram Janmbhoomi agitation. Altogether nearly 1890 people mostly Muslims had lost their lives in this district.

At one level, reconstruction of destroyed homes and restoring livelihood for the victims was taken up. But the task of building trust between antagonistic communities, so that victims could return home, was more uphill. The Hindus were afraid of retribution, the Muslims justifiably hurt. Barve and her colleagues got them to talk even if it meant an angry exchange of words.

Barve moved back to Mumbai where she would become founder member and trustee of the Mumbai Mohalla Committee Movement Trust. The mohalla committees, started by citizens in March 1994, after the Mumbai riots became an alert network which put an end to wild rumours and prevented violence from occurring.

The Mumbai model was based on the Bhiwandi experience. Despite a history of rioting, Bhiwandi had remained calm after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. A police officer had formed 70 mohalla committees of a 100 people each consisting of Hindus and Muslims. The committees met once a month and before religious festivities.

The Mumbai mohalla committees were started during a time when resentment against police highhandedness was simmering after the riots and the serial bomb blasts. Former police commissioner JF Ribeiro, had secular credentials and was respected by the Muslim community. His involvement helped to build confidence.

Barve suggested senior police officers talk directly to

the people. The police commissioner sat stoically through meetings where people gave vent to their resentment at police violation of human rights. The commissioner gave his point of view, honestly and firmly.

The painstaking work of forming mohalla committees then started. Relationships were formed because of simple acts: the police commissioner Satish Sahney donating blood at a camp organized by Iqbal Hirji. Hirji helping a young Shiv Sainik with his eye donation camp. Or the JJ Marg police station inviting boys of both communities in Imamwada to play a volleyball match against them.

Before the Godhra incident, the mohalla committees had

passed a few tests. The police commissioner delayed the release of Mani Ratnam's film "Bombay" so that facilitators from the mohalla committees could see the movie, discuss it with people and scotch rumours. The film had caused cinema halls to be burnt in Hyderabad.

Barve would travel back to meet the two men, Bhupendra Singh and Davendra Singh who had been attacked on that fateful train journey. Bhupendra had to shift to Ludhiana. Both showed immense courage by putting their lives together helped only by their families.

Barve now runs the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation. She lives in Gurgaon, Haryana.

'Police leadership matters'

Photo: LAKSHMAN ANAND



Despite the 1992-93 riots and frequent serial blasts, Mumbai remained peaceful. What made this possible?

In Mumbai, a mechanism to prevent communal violence had been put in place. As news about the Godhra incident in Gujarat came in, the police swung into action and activated citizens groups as well as the mohalla committees. They made themselves very visible in public. Senior police officials went to TV channels to keep pace with the news and scotch rumours quickly, so that they did not lead to violence.

The initiative for the Mumbai experience came from citizens. The police

force, extremely discredited after the earlier incidents of carnage, was quick to seize the offer. There was also good leadership among the senior ranks of police officers. The city government, the police, the citizens groups and mohalla committees coordinated their efforts.

What are the mechanisms required to prevent communal violence?

As long as India remains a conflict zone, with emotive issues, we do need a mechanism which can be activated in times of crisis and at the first hint of trouble.

In Bihar the Bhiwandi model has been tried. After the Babri Masjid

demolition the district magistrate of Aligarh brought the law enforcement agencies and a wide range of citizens together to prevent violence. We don't have an overall analysis of all the mechanisms.

Mechanisms should be ongoing and not set up solely to deal with a crisis. They need to prevent violence. This job is not exclusively of law enforcement agencies. Small disputes spark a conflagration but we remain aloof and blame the poor. At the same time, we cannot expect people alone to prevent it. Both need to work with each other.

Politicians also have a role to play in communal violence. How can they be restrained?

When the mohalla committees were celebrating the success of their hard work in preventing violence in Mumbai, post-Godhra, one citizen remarked frankly that the reason why riots did not take place was that the Shiv Sena government had decided against it. What is interesting to note is that politicians can be restrained if there is

public resolve and police resolve.

A woman from one of Mumbai's slums pointed out that the process of forming mohalla committees had made people more sensitive and vigilant to communal violence.

Politicians have the right to demonstrate so long as they don't disturb public order. We are simply asking that the police be neutral.

Victims of communal carnage repeatedly ask for justice, not reconciliation. Are the two contradictory?

It is not a question of justice versus reconciliation. We fight for both. In a diverse country like ours, with complex social and economic issues and with so many agitations, can we even afford not to reconcile?

We must also look at different forms of restorative justice. Most often victims of horrific violence have to simply live with trauma. The low rate of conviction has let people get away with heinous crimes and this encourages violence. How the Best Bakery case proceeds is therefore of great importance.

GET TRAINED

COMMUNICATE HEALTH MESSAGES EFFECTIVELY

Centre for Media Studies (CMS) in partnership with Population Foundation of India (PFI) offers a training programme in "Communication for Behavioral Change" to NGOs working in the health sector. The program also teaches participants to manage health projects

efficiently. CMS organises six training sessions every year.

For details contact: Alka Tomar/Asha Alex, Project Director, CMS. Tel. No: 011-2686 4020, 2685 1660. Fax: 011-26968282 E-mail: alka@cmsindia.org and asha@cmsindia.org

GENDER RIGHTS

Asian Centre for Organisational Research and Development (ACORD)

New Delhi, in partnership with the National Institute of Open Schools (NIOS) offers training in community health, under its Jan Swasthya Pariipoorna Mahila programme.

The focus of the programme is on gender rights. Three workshops are organised. Two papers are theoretical and the third is a practical session with a doctor. Participants learn to communicate health issues to the community. They are taught to manage simple illnesses.

For more information contact: Nitu Alag, Tel.No: 011-6238495, 6287247. Email: acord@del2.vsnl.net.in

AT DR SHROFF'S

Dr Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital conducts specialized training programmes to improve skills.

Doctors who have recently acquired their degree can apply for a one year fellowship programme to build experience and learn to handle sophisticated equipment.

A second training programme teaches the latest techniques in cataract surgery.

In addition there is a training programme for young optometrists. First hand experience on screening patients and identifying eye disorders is provided.

Optometrists and ophthalmologists working in rural and underdeveloped areas are especially encouraged to apply. **Contact:** 011-2325 1564, 2325 1581, 2326 2435. FAX: 2325 1589

Democracy and its Capital face

ARUNA ROY

I have often wondered how many different worlds India contains. I am a product of a mixed upbringing. I was born of Tamilian parents, brought up in bureaucratic Delhi married to a Brahmo Bengali and live and work in rural Rajasthan. The right side up of this deal, was that I met "Indians" as distinct from "Tamilians", "Bengalies", "UPites" and so on. I had Kashmiri, Keralite, Punjabi, Bengali, Maharashtrian, Gujarati, Sindhi, Telugu, Tamilian and Bihari friends.

We learnt to eat the delicacies of our culturally different but friendly neighbours. My parents eclectic in their world view, encouraged us to celebrate all the Indian festivals, from Diwali to Id, from Buddha Jayanti to Christmas. All our neighbours wondered what we were, but we always had some friends ready to join us in our celebrations. Always beginning and ending with the story of the great person in whose memory we had enjoyed a holiday from school!

The good thing about Delhi, as it was then, was also its visual history. The splendour of its monuments, the gardens and the debris of old civilisations, which one kept coming by so casually. There was the wonder of Hindu Indraprastha, interspersed with the beauty of medieval and Mughal splendour, and the grand design of Lutyens Delhi. All this composite culture was my home. The shady roads of New Delhi, the echoing tombs of Lodhi Gardens, the labyrinth of the Purana Quila- all went to shape, with my parents love and the necessity of school, the reference of my wonderful childhood.

It was a Delhi and an India which still remembered Gandhi and saw Nehru adorn public functions. And above all, it was safe, we could walk anywhere at any time without fear. We thought that we had all learnt from the memory of partition never to repeat the same mistakes. The cardinal principle was to keep away from hate and violence. The fruit vendor, who came every day and said, "phalwallah janab", who had left his Rawalpindi shop behind did not speak of revenge and killing. Because he like many others on this side had seen the two faces of violence, on either side of the border. Underneath the beauty of the city was the pain of its collective memory.

As I grew up and discovered the ways of adult life, and saw beyond the childhood joys, I began to look at the slums, the poverty, the differences between Madangir and south Delhi. I saw the subtle snobbery and the violence of affluence, its indifference and its single-minded agenda to keep itself going. The biggest horror was the fact that most people did not care. The sight of a poor person sleeping on the street, did not invoke pity, guilt, caring, but even more callously, the need to get rid of the sight, a blot on the horizon of the city's "beauty". What would the city be without its people? And what indeed is beauty?

Something was very wrong. It was like a constant refrain, grew into a feeling and has since established itself as part of a larger conviction. My parents had said that what bothered one, had to be addressed. The young man I met in the university and later married, was adamant that life had to be taken seriously and that social opinion did not matter, its relevance was only important if it was right. I appeared for and passed the Indian Administrative Service Exam, hoping to be of service to people.

The structure showed me early enough, how innocent I had been. The overhang of a colonial power structure still tries to control and arbitrate, unable to at best and perpetrating at worst, the context of a government alienated from its people. The life I have led since has been a journey to work out a dialectic between the ideal that we want and the practical possibilities of existence.

There is a flip side to everything. And every dream always has the possibility of changing into a nightmare. Delhi is not India. But for many of us it still is the meeting point for Indians who are in the business of governance, for those who want to address issues of collective importance. Even though I grew up loving Delhi, I have for a larger number of years seen it as a city growing steadily into the kind of place I do not like.

I now wait to leave this sometimes cruel, and most often impersonal city. A city where the poor are seen as an infringement on its aesthetics; but where in fact the lack of good taste is more starkly manifest in the vulgarity of affluence, and the monstrosities that pass for symbols of good living. In the complete indifference to the plight of people for whom this republic was born, and the ideals of Gandhi who was assassinated in the heart of this city.

The horrors of the Sikh killings in Delhi, the plight of Kashmiri pandits and the genocide in Gujarat, show us what a heavy toll a nation can pay for the breakdown of the rule of law, endorsed by a silent "civil society". In the growing acceptance of cheap

tickets to eternity – combining self-interest with a new definition of the nation's identity, and passing it off as "true nationalism".

When many in the aspirant and entrenched middle-class have begun to think of the poor, they see them as trench soldiers in the great communal warfare, with "the enemy" – the other religions. For all the religions the worst has been always the decay within, the degradation of moral values, and the interwoven hierarchies like the gender inequality integral to most religions. But the legitimacy given to caste hierarchies is particular to the people of this sub-continent.

We still practice untouchability, our women carry night soil on their heads. We are indifferent to a social structure that allows the debasement of fellow human beings. We have not questioned the fact that most of our women are still bought like cattle, that they are sold with anticipated interest plus the capital itself that they embody. One would have thought that the big city would help break these practices.

Modern democratic urban India has only found more insidious means to build on these divides. We shamelessly use caste votes in politics; our bureaucracies operate

strongly on the priorities of caste lobbies, and the latest manifestations of the reservation debates are really shocking in their lack of maturity.

Many of us have lived our lives with the poor in rural and urban areas, seeking different ways of reducing insecurities and changing the lives of those living on the margins. One of the most rewarding aspects of working with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, from a small hamlet in rural Rajasthan has been the strength of human relationships and sense of community that exists in rural areas despite the inherent caste and feudal controls that exist.

For many of us the choice made of working in a rural area, was also an attempt to reform relationships that cities like Delhi, no longer have space for. Unfortunately, our work brings us repeatedly to Delhi and an India we chose not to live in. The right to information campaign draws its strength from the ordinary citizens in the villages of Rajasthan.

But these demands for accountability, both implicitly and explicitly question the power centres far away. There has been a growing realisation that questions must be asked from the micro to the macro, and from issues of implementation to policy. Asking questions, demanding answers, and following this trail backwards leads eventually to the

corridors of power in Delhi.

We have to learn to deal with this Delhi. One that takes decisions which affect us all, through its policies and projects; which defines a political ethos (one which most of "civil society" now condemns as unethical), which is more interested in a "show case" democracy that allows for the vote and disallows accountability except in its most limited definition. High security, even higher barbed wire fences, offices with elaborate pass requirements greet ordinary citizens who come to meet the people controlling their lives.

The same decision makers have systematically closed off all physical spaces available for popular protest.

And even if you have a story to tell, you are faced by a "market driven" media, that argues in favour of the frivolous and disvalues serious content. The argument always is, "that is what the reader wants." I often wonder if I am really a part of such a small, shrinking minority that wants serious matters discussed in the media. It could not be so, for in large numbers most of the people we meet, the poor as well the middle class complain of the content of newspapers. With all the avenues closed, how will popular opinion and our collective conscience find a platform in this city?

The huge and powerful middle-class in Delhi has to move beyond complaints -it has to find a purpose and learn to act. The Delhi of the marginalized has raised and addressed many important issues. The crisis of the homeless; the need for citizens to oversee expenditure incurred in their name; the rights of people who live in the "slums", who serve the city's needs, but are driven to the edge both physically and metaphorically.

Most of these efforts come from groups of more disadvantaged citizens, many of them who don't even enjoy basic citizenship rights. Privileged citizens of Delhi must assert themselves, for themselves and for the rest of India. They are uniquely placed to be able to influence the culture and ethos of this city. As citizens they have to speak up, question and be active and critical. They have to spare time to run this democracy.

Aruna Roy works with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) a non-party political organisation in Rajasthan and is a member of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI)

