

Civil Society

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CAMPAIGN

GURGAON WANTS TO VOTE

...but in India's fastest
growing city poll lists
are not updated

COVER STORY



THE COUNT IN GURGAON

Residents, led by People's Action, battle to get voter rights and change old political equations

8

NGOS take poll plunge **4**

Indo-Pak amity for just Rs 19 lakhs! **5**



Oh, Punjab: East is West, West is East **5**

I am immune to success stories
Ashok Khosla **6**

Politicians aren't always villains **13**

Gidoomal: A Sindhi and a Christian too **15**



Review: Mad enough to ask for peace **17**

A Calcuttan in Kolkata
by Kabir Mustafi **18**

Civil Society

NGOs now really and truly in politics

THE decision to launch the People's Political Front formally ends for many important social activists the debate over engaging with the political process. For a long time now, the development needs of the country have invariably been derailed by self-serving politicians. Social activists have been spectators to this perversion. Politics and the business of elections, it has been the feeling, is too complex a game for honest people to get into. But as the problems in the country have mounted and politicians have become more obdurate and callous, many activists have out of sheer frustration either flirted with politics or made the crossover. The launching of the People's Political Front by Medha Patkar gives formal status to this trend. It has now been decided that the front will support candidates with a clean record and sensitivity to development issues. This, it is hoped, will over time raise the standard of politics in the country. It will certainly give people a wider choice of candidates to vote for. The front will also seek to weld together people's demands which have thus far been disaggregated and championed in isolation. In this way it will correlate concerns and position them on a national platform.

The need for change is apparent everywhere. Our cover story on Gurgaon shows how middle class people are coming out in support of their right to a better quality of life. The resident welfare associations in Gurgaon have chosen to remain apolitical but they have simultaneously sent out a signal that they will make sure their votes count. Incredibly, they have done in a matter of days what has not been done for a decade: brought some 13,000 voters on to the rolls. This is no mean achievement. It is amazing that electoral rolls had not been updated in one of India's fastest growing urban centres which boasts of shopping malls and corporate offices. It also speaks volumes for the level of responsibility shown by politicians who have allowed so many middle class families to invest their life savings in an area which has no master plan and could tomorrow easily sink into being an urban disaster. Note must also be made of the campaign to cleanse politics launched by Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta. JP fervently believes that politicians are not all villains. Reform, to be meaningful, he says, must come from within the political system. We have a detailed interview with him in our Perspectives section.

Finally, this is the season of India-Pakistan friendship and, far from the cricket field, two events in Delhi brought people together through art and handicrafts. Anhad helped build the Punjabi connection and Jaya Jaitly organised a rare workshop for craftsmen from the two countries at Dilli Haat. Jaitly has been working on this project for quite some time now and invariably some tension or the other in bilateral relations came in the way of this simple and effective means of coming together. Crafts persons of both sides told us how much they had to learn from each other.

We are happy to present the second instalment of our Campus page. We invite schools to tell us more about themselves because we are uniquely placed to be the bridge between civil society initiatives and the young.

Umesh Anand

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CAUSE & EFFECT

Maha Panchayat Indo-pak

Civil Society News

New Delhi

CHIEF minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit attended a mahapanchayat of the homeless, organised by Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA) near the crumbling edifice of the Jama Masjid. She said her government would try to build permanent shelters for the city's homeless in the next five years.

"We will make buildings so that you can have a roof over your head, 12 months of the year," she assured the gathering. "There is a shortage of land, but not of money." She suggested the skills of the homeless be identified so that they can get training and jobs. A government scheme is to be drawn up. The crowd cheered and waved AAA's flag. Its symbol was, quite naturally, the outline of a home.

Dikshit's statement has roused hope in the hearts of the city's street people. During the winter months, the state government had pitched tents and opened new shelters so that people would not freeze to death. But then summer arrived and the tents are being dismantled.

AAA has been requesting the state government for shelters which would be open, day and night. "We need protection from the heat, the cold and the rain," said Harishchandra, a homeless person from Jamuna bazaar in Delhi's walled city. "Some of us work through the night." The women at the mahapanchayat, agreed. Shelters were especially necessary to protect girls, they said. Boys too tended to take to crime if left unchecked on the streets. The homeless also wanted special shelters for the mentally challenged and the handicapped. The emotional bonding, family feeling and sense of unity the shelters were providing were emphasised.

Speakers at the mahapanchayat had asked for livelihood programmes, especially access to finance so that they could start small businesses. A homeless mechanical engineer, Ramesh Taylor said he sold polythene bags and couldn't even earn Rs 500 a month. "I need about Rs 5000 to improve my business, but I can't get it," he said.

The homeless complained about police harassment and of being arbitrarily thrown into homes for beggars. "We are simply earning our bread and butter under adverse circumstances," said Jyoti, who had been evicted from her jhuggi and was now working as a house- maid. "The police don't listen. We need to be form a strong union and influence politics," said Ramesh Kumar Sharma.

The mahapanchayat expressed its gratitude to AAA for renovating derelict shelters and providing medical aid, blankets and livelihood programmes. Uday, who works as a postman for the homeless said he had learnt how to handle computers and he even had a student. The meeting ended with performances by street magicians, singers and theatre artistes.

The skills and talent of the city's street people were on full display.

NGOS take poll plunge

Civil Society News

New Delhi

RUMOURS have been rife about Medha Patkar, leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) standing for election. The news as we go to press is that she is not, but not that she will not.

Social activists who worry about the quality of political life in the country have however come together to launch the People's Political Front (PPF), a platform from which they will seek to raise development issues and support candidates with an unblemished record. PPF is not a party, not yet at least.

"We want to usher in alternative politics which is value- based, reflects the genuine concerns of the electorate and in which the process of contesting elections is just as important," said Patkar at the launch of the PPF in Delhi on March 22.. She is convenor of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) and co-convenor of the PPF.

NAPM consists of grassroots groups in several states. Among its members are noted activists Swami Agnivesh and Thomas Kocherry. So far these organisations have been largely apolitical. They have spent years, fighting for peoples rights, often confronting the state.

The convenor of the PPF is Aruna Roy, leader of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), well- known for their campaign on the Right to Information in Rajasthan.

"People's organisations have now understood the importance of electoral politics and consequent governance. Corrupt governance has led to national policies being shaped detrimental to peoples concerns and for the benefit of vested interest groups and the power elites," said Patkar.

The PPF is supporting the candidature of Sidhdharaj Dhadha, freedom

fighter and a minister in the first post-independence government in Rajasthan, Jnanpith award winner and Kannada writer, UR Anathamurthy, will be fielded from Bangalore, tribal leader CK Janu from Idukki, Kerala, Sunil from Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Shamim Behan from Betul in MP,

PPF's election manifesto supports a Quit WTO campaign and opposes globalisation in public services, banking and exports. It is against disinvestment and deregulation and favours a mixed economy with space for the public sector. Trade policies which encourage privatisation, global capitalism and selling of India's natural resources are also opposed.

PPF is against inter-linking of rivers, privatisation of forests and rivers and projects by national or international financial agencies which displace people. The manifesto favours appropriate policies for drought proofing, water, food security, health, housing, education, energy, the disabled and

the urban poor.

PPF asserts the right of the people to their natural resources and supports adivasi self- rule. It upholds the right to work, asks for guaranteed employment, a labour policy for the unorganised sector and work for educated unemployed youth.

The manifesto opposes mechanisation which takes away jobs and speaks for women, fish workers, farmers, agricultural workers, unorganised workers and crafts people.

To counter corruption and the arbitrary use of state power, it asks for transparency and accountability in governance and demands notification of the Right to Information law passed by the Lok Sabha.

It also demands social action to remove untouchability, gender inequality and discrimination on the basis of religion. The manifesto staunchly opposes communalism whether Hindutva or Jehadi.

"We are challenging the kind of politics which privatises water, oil and energy and seeks funds from those very business houses to contest elections. Ours will be the beginning of a larger desh bachao process for the participation of those who have been marginalised," said Patkar.



NBA leader Medha Patkar

SAAB PICTURES

"We want to usher in alternative politics which is value- based, reflects the genuine concerns of the electorate."

Razak Mansur from Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Others in the first list are Lingarajbhai from Bargarh, Orissa and Digambar, a Dalit activist from Dharamgarh in Kalahandi district, Orissa.

More candidates will be announced in a second list. Disabled rights activist, Javed Abidi, who is contesting as an independent candidate in New Delhi may also get PPF support.

To prevent fragmentation of the secular vote, the PPF will not form alliances with any political party, but will support secular parties, as and how the need arises. "This will not take away our right to question them and seek answers on people's issues of livelihood, employment, poverty, forest rights, food and the right to information," said Patkar.

DEVELOPMENTOON

BY SHARAD



Indo-Pak amity for just Rs 19 lakhs!

Jaya Jaitly shows how crafts people build bonds that matter

Civil Society News

New Delhi

It was an Indo-Pakistani engagement that could only belong to a season of sub-continental amity. Ten artisans from Pakistan set up stalls at Dilli Haat, the capital's famed ethnic marketplace, to sell crafts, share skills with Indian artisans and take home the gift of friendship.

Malik Mohammed Abdul Rehman arrived from Multan laden with lamp-shades of translucent camel skin. "Our printing is not as fine as the Kashmiri printing so we'd like to learn," he said.

Peshawar sent Riaz Ahmed who demonstrated how he painted delicate pictures on cloth with wax. "I painted the Taj Mahal from a picture. It took me a month and sold well. Now I am finally going to Agra to see the monument, face to face."

It was easy to mistake three women, immersed in embroidery, as being family. "But we are family," they said. "Our bond is through our work." They were from Kutch and Karnataka and Multan in Pakistan.

"When you buy a product from an artisan it decorates your home and spreads love", said Khaled Javaid of Lok Virsa, Pakistan's cultural heritage organisation, to visitors at a stall selling woodwork.

It was activist and politician Jaya Jaitly who made this cultural transaction a reality. Dilli Haat celebrates ten years and owes its existence to her. Jaitly recalled how an idea which came from her cultural explorations in rural India, became a landmark. Other states in India have borrowed it and South Africa is planning a similar ethnic marketplace in Durban.

And what did it cost to put the whole exchange together? Just Rs 19 lakhs, says Jaitly. Excerpts from an interview with *Civil Society*.

How did the idea of a Dilli Haat emerge?

When the globalisation process started, there was this supermarket called Nanz in Delhi.

I thought to myself how silly, we don't need all this. We have colourful marketplaces with beautiful people. Why do we have to bung everything into a cosmetic store? And what happens to all our human beings, all the women who trade here and the baskets they use made by artisans? In all these years if you wanted crafts, you would have to hunt for them in village haats. These mar-



Jaya Jaitly at Dilli Haat

kets have always been part of my exploration. That's how the idea of a Dilli Haat was born. The words are so simple. Everybody can understand it and anybody can bring you here.

And the cultural exchange? How did you make it happen?

The idea began when Asma Jehangir (Pakistan's well-known human rights activist), visited India with a delegation sometime in 2001. I was president of the Samata Party and decided to host a tea for them. Generally, such events are hosted at the party office but I decided to organise it at Navdanya. Then at the tea, I said that I hoped a time would come when I could have crafts people from Pakistan at Dilli Haat. Everybody in the audience clapped and many of those in the delegation were craftspeople.

I knew which crafts in Pakistan tallied with ours. I did not want crafts people just to sit in the marketplace and sell. It was to get them here to share experiences and skills. It could be technology or design. Maybe some have got left behind in the development process of that skill and needed to catch up.

But then the attack on Parliament happened. First, the bus to Pakistan stopped then the flights stopped. The atmospherics on both sides were not conducive. By last summer the present High Commissioner of Pakistan, he is related to me, was appointed. Pakistan also appointed

a new High Commissioner to India. I told them about my idea and they said it was a very good one. They agreed to back it, but remain in the background.

They said if it became a government programme, it could face hostility.

It was a tentative beginning, but just after that the Prime Minister opened a whole new route. He talked about opening up trade and a common market just before he went for the SAARC summit. I also found out that under SAARC funding is available for cultural exchange. So I realised the funds were also available. I put up a note to the PM who said it was very good and that I should go ahead.

But what prevents governments from sponsoring such exchanges?

In a way governments did think of it. In SAARC they made provisions for this kind of cultural exchange, but people have to implement it. Governments are not very good at implementation. They can send an official with a briefcase. He will worry about the crease in his trousers before he sits down with an artisan. Governments are happy to fund credible people's organisations or NGOs who work with integrity.

How much did it cost?

It cost us altogether Rs 19 lakhs. This includes not only travel and stay for all the artisans from India and Pakistan but also a daily wage component. For Pakistani artisans it is 75% of \$45 per day and Rs 500 for the Indian artisans and three designers.

You are a politician and well-connected. You can do this. How can other NGOs do it?

People like me can open the way. I do everything openly, whether it is accounting or implementation. Everybody can participate. We can do this with Burma or Bangladesh. Once doors open, more people will think, it's not so difficult, so let's do it once a year or maybe twice.

Has the idea of Dilli Haat spread?

Last year I went to South Africa to explore links between our countries in sharing the Gandhian heritage. Gandhi thought about khadi in South Africa and the notion of Afri-khadi started from that point. Their artisans are also on the roadside, on pavements We spoke to them about the concept of Dilli Haat.

Delegations from South Africa have come here twice. They are keen to work out how they could have a haat like this in Durban.

Oh, Punjab: East is West, West is East

Civil Society News

New Delhi

The united colours of Punjab, east and west, were displayed at an impromptu art exhibition organised by Anhad in Delhi. Five Punjabi artists from Lahore Chitrkar, a studio and art gallery started in Lahore by painters, musicians and writers, explained their work to curious onlookers. Defence minister George Fernandes and veteran Communist leader AB Bardhan breezed in to take a look.

Lahore Chitrkar promotes traditional art forms and Punjabi culture. Eclectica, an amorphous network of people who promote cultural interaction between India and Pakistan, brought them across.

"Punjabi is our common heritage," says Shumita of Eclectica.

"We refer to ourselves as belonging to east Punjab

and west Punjab." The Chandigarh Press Club now offers reciprocal membership to scribes from the Lahore Press Club. A 70-year-old Punjabi magazine, called Preetlari, is being nurtured by Eclectica to spread cultural togetherness.

Shumita says it all began when her group went to Pakistan to attend a Punjabi conference and met members of Lahore Chitrkar. The Indian group was impressed with Lahore Chitrkar's modern library, music room and book collection. They visited the historic city of Wazirabad, near Lahore. "We were deeply moved by their love for the town and their efforts to preserve it. We seem to have lost that," she says.

The collection on display was certainly eclectic. There was Krishna on canvas, Jesus Christ engraved on wood, pictures of heritage sites, derelict water harvesting structures and eye catching photographs on Pakistan Azher Jafri. Photographs of Wazirabad, by Mohammed Imran, a member of "Save Apna Wazirabad," caught peo-

ple's attention.

In Delhi there are people who migrated from there in 1947. One morning, the artists turned up at Gujranwalla, a bastion of post partition Punjabis, and introduced themselves. Elderly residents of Wazirabad, were amazed.

"They went into great detail about where they used to live, rattled off numerous names of lanes and bylanes," says Shahid Mirza, who teaches art at Lahore Chitrkar. "Then they said, but you look just like a Hindu." Shahid laughed. "Actually many of our ancestors were Hindus."

It was Shahid who painted Krishna on canvas. The wood engravings were by Shadi Khan, who is also a hardware trader from Lahore. There were also pictures of Hindu and Sikh temples in Pakistan, sorry west Punjab, by Akram Varraich.

From Delhi the exhibition will travel to Chandigarh to display their work at Nek Chand's famous rock gardens.

They will then travel to Gurdaspur, which is Shadi

'I am immune to success stories'

Civil Society News

New Delhi

HOW do you build a sturdy home on an empty pocket? About 120 people from 20 countries discussed "Sustainable Habitat and Livelihood for the Poor," at the International Basin conference, organised by Development Alternatives in New Delhi.

Basin stands for the Building Advisory Services and Information Network, consisting of nine organisations, worldwide. Basin gives information and advice on sustainable building technologies and know-how. Development Alternatives too has innovated with low-cost technologies for the housing sector.

Houses made of straw, bamboo, homes resistant to floods, earthquakes and cyclones were discussed. Money, infrastructure and incomes for the poor were talked about. There were papers on water, sanitation, good governance and housing rights. There was also a panel discussion on information technology and development.

"Adequate housing for all" by 2015 is a lofty goal. But India has a long way to go and **Ashok Khosla**, Director of Development Alternatives, spoke to *Civil Society* about building incomes, brick by brick.

The conference meets at a time when globalisation and liberalisation are making poor people poorer. What is your prescription?

Globalisation is here to stay. It may very well have benefited the rich, when they talk about India Shining, for instance, but nearly seven or eight hundred million have got left out from that process.

We are going through a phase of transition when livelihoods get replaced, say by cheaper imports. Societies have a way of adjusting and maybe emerging stronger. It is the intermediate phase governments need to take care of and we haven't done that. If we design a better fit, globalisation may very well benefit many more people.

How can we make poor people richer?

In my hierarchy of methods, I would place livelihood followed by drinking water, sanitation, energy and the production of food and access to it. The money is there, so is the technology. We could do this in three or five years by focusing on policies, fiscal measures, incentives.

Our policies are geared to global competitiveness. We seem to be decreasing jobs, instead of creating them. The rich will take care of themselves. The government has to



Ashok Khosla of Development Alternatives

enable the other part of the economy to grow, by setting up the same structure for the poor that they have set up for the rich.

We hear so many success stories. Why doesn't it seem to go beyond that?

I've got to a stage when I am completely immunised by them. We are not looking for one off beautiful stories. We want to understand how a story, even if it's not perfect, can be multiplied on a much larger scale. Can they lead to changes in the lives of more than a small number of people? I think the question which is not asked often enough is --so what? You can't live forever in the "pilot/experiment" syndrome. Only in the case of water-harvesting have we gone beyond story-telling.

But not in housing?

It has been less, largely because of a top-down government approach. First, there should be a law that no politician can be associated with poverty alleviation programmes. Secondly, we have to enable markets to work. Instead, the state has a give-away mentality. It's structured in such a way that money goes somewhere else, either to political party coffers or back to it.

What we have found, from our experience in building housing, is that starting a local construction material economy, works. It enables people to position themselves as contractors, suppliers and so on. We enable a local economy to bootstrap itself.

Does housing finance continue to be a major impediment?

I'm afraid we haven't shown much imagination. Housing has to be made available. Poor people don't have money to put in as collateral. They need longer time to pay, so that they can generate an income, meanwhile.

Micro-credit is only one of the answers. What we need is what I call mini-credit. That is what will create jobs. Micro-credit gets you from raw survival to subsistence. You can't scale up. I believe you have to go to an enterprise level where you can set up an

industry, create jobs not just self-employment, and connect with a modern economy. That enables you to go from subsistence to surplus. You need consumers, not just producers and for that you have to generate incomes. But of course it has to be less damaging to the environment.

Is the problem poor governance?

Governance has to work for the poor. The delivery system is faulty. It's easy for big businessmen to get Rs 100 crores. But it is almost impossible to get Rs 10 lakhs to set up an industry in a village. Roads are a tyranny of civilisation, but if there is one symbol of modernity it is roads. We have to find different kinds of technologies to connect people as Tarahaat has been doing. This idea of providing urban services to rural areas is a good one. Government can do it or enable people to provide those services themselves.

ISSUES MATTER. WE'VE DONE SEVEN

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THE COUNT IN GURGAON

Residents set out to teach politicians a lesson

Umesh Anand

Civil Society

YOU can buy a house in Gurgaon. You can buy a vote too, if you are a dodgy politician. But, if as a resident, you want to exercise your democratic right and get your name included in the electoral rolls, just forget it. It's much too tough.

Gurgaon is the hottest address in northern India, perhaps all of India. It has acre upon acre of new housing. It has an array of corporate offices. Former secretaries to the government of India live here. Its shopping malls are billed as an experience to match Singapore. You can play golf. Or disco late into the night. A fairly decent Thai meal is there for the asking. Italian, too, in case that is what you would prefer.

And yet in this shining upmarket model of Indian urbanisation on the fringes of Delhi, burgeoning with people, the list of voters has just grown by barely 7,000 in five years. In 1996 there were 184,880 voters and in 2000 there were just 190,931. By contrast, the census shows a population of 1.6 million and a growth rate of 44.64 in the decade 1991-2001.

So, where have Gurgaon's voters gone missing?

Estimates vary, but the number of eligible voters in Gurgaon is put at 300,000. And if People's Action, an NGO, and several resident welfare associations (RWAs) are to be believed, politicians and the administration collude to keep Gurgaon's new residents off the rolls.

Fully updated electoral rolls would make Gurgaon the rare Assembly seat in the country where educated and empowered voters would decide the fate of a candidate.

In the last Assembly elections just 55% of the 190,931 in the electorate voted. The winner got a mere 25,000 votes. The new residents can easily throw this delicate jigsaw into disarray. They could also transform an essentially rural constituency, with its typical demands, into an urban one with different problems and expectations.

But getting on to that voters' list has so far been next to doing the impossible. If you turned up at the local election office, or a venue decreed by it, you were told that there was only one form. It was your headache to get it photocopied. Then, you would have to get an affidavit made and have your antecedents verified by the local court. After that you would stand in a queue to submit your papers. A photographer, appointed only by the local Election office, and available only on a certain day, would take your picture for the voter identity card.

At least one or two days would be spent in this process. The outcome of your efforts was also uncertain. Many identity cards arrived with names and addresses wrong. Your gender could be wrong as well. Government teachers were given the responsibility of giving out the card and they took their own time.

You also had to wait for announcements in the local media to know that the rolls were being updated. These would be generally made in regional papers. The result was that new residents of Gurgaon invariably missed out on announcement of a voter registration drive.

Were these hurdles the result of sloppy governance or were they by design? Either way they seemed to benefit politicians and work against the residents. The new residents are articulate, educated and demanding. They have invariably sunk life savings into houses and flats in Gurgaon. They feel tricked because for all Gurgaon's gloss, it is plagued by bad roads, power breakdowns, a water crisis. Garbage has nowhere to go and

shopping malls have been built next to private apartments making life hell for the residents.

Incredibly, Gurgaon's rapid urbanisation has come without a master plan. Builders have merely carved up chunks of the district for themselves over the years with the support of politicians of the day. There is so much to answer. For that empowering new residents would be the equivalent of committing political suicide, if they use their votes to express their displeasure.

In a hard won concession from the Election Commission of India, resident welfare associations (RWAs) have now tried to set the record right by verifying the antecedents of residents and putting their forms in order. Just two four-day efforts have brought in some 13,000 new voters.

It was Inder Nath, convenor of the Gurgaon chapter of People's Action, who took the matter up with the Election Commission. A retired government servant, Inder Nath lives in Sushant Lok, an Ansal colony.

Inder Nath wrote to the commission and much to his surprise got an answer from the present Chief Election Commissioner, CS Krishna Murthy. He was invited to a meeting at which he pleaded for simplifying the procedure for registering voters. He suggested that RWAs be allowed to verify individual antecedents and hand the details over to the local election office.

Krishna Murthy decided to give it a try. The Commission overstepped the state election machinery and said that 60 RWAs should be allowed to authenticate applications for registration of voters. After several hiccups, the 60 RWAs were finally allowed to get into action and in the flurry of activity followed 8000 names were gathered in just four days from February 11 to 15. Another round followed in March and more names came in.

Although the letter from the EC arrived on February 4, the election office gave the green signal only on the February 9. The RWAs and People's Action were told to deposit all forms with the local election office by February 16.

It couldn't have been made tougher. Still the RWAs led by People's Action swung into action. About 120,000 copies of Form 6 were distributed. Inder Nath campaigned with an auto-rickshaw and a jeep festooned with banners. Far from indifference, people were eager to enrol. The 8000 new names arrived in a torrent.

Palam Vihar submitted the most applications followed by Sushant Lok and Qutb Enclave.

Applications were authenticated in record time by the RWAs and submitted, a feat the local election office would have found hard to accomplish.

But applications continued to pour in so Inder Nath requested the EC for a second appointment. People's Action met the Legal Advisor to the EC who assured them that a second drive could be organised.

So between March 11 and 15 a second drive began. This time People's Action targeted 5,000 new voters.

Once again RWAs got down to work. Palam Vihar submitted the most applications.

"I think this is the first time, anybody has campaigned to get people on the electoral rolls", says Sanjay Kaul, President of People's Action.

"This is probably the only constituency in the country where the number of educated middle class residents is more than the number of uneducated citizens," says Kaul. "This accounts for the greater level of awareness and the possibility of dialogue between rural Gurgaon and the urban city."

Although the metamorphosis of Gurgaon began when Sanjay Gandhi set up the Maruti factory in the early 1980s, the vote bank of local politicians, still comes from the old Gurgaon with its cluster of Jat villages and small town folk. The politicians are rustics with a rural bent.

"People with a rural perception will want cheap electricity or illegal land. They want their area to be safe for children, the bus stop should be around, women should be able to walk around. But what happens when you allow them to get away in numbers, is you get those policies implemented which represent their interests and not those which represent yours," points out Kaul.

The urban middle class generally shies away from politics. According to Kaul, they believe their vote doesn't count, so why bother. In any case, rural India sweeps aside urban India, during any election.

"But what is happening today, is that urban educated middle-class Indians are large enough in number to make a difference at least in those areas. Many don't realise this. Also because of the quality of politics, no decent person wants to get involved," says Kaul. Gurgaon is a classic example of this trend.

In the last assembly elections the victory came via a slender margin. "It is here that a difference can be made," says Kaul. "If we can influence the election of candidates, then we have a chance. But if you don't vote, you don't count."

"The whole point was how do we get the administration to react to us?" explains Kaul. "We had meetings with the builders who would not listen. We understood the nexus between the builders and the administration was strong. We realised the whole problem

was that we were just not large enough to affect anybody's chances in an election. The question that arises is what does the administration have to do with elections? The fact is the administration is completely politicised. We know that this happens in large parts of the country so this is not unique."

In September last year, People's Action organised the RWAs into a Joint Front. At the meeting Kaul suggested residents inflict electoral damage on unworthy political candidates. It was the only way to get redressal.

But the new residents were not on the electoral rolls. It's not as if residents did not want to vote. The process was arduous and time-consuming and people were not sure about the outcome.

LAKSHMAN



Sanjay Kaul, president of People's Action on his rounds

The middle-class shies away from politics. But what is happening today, is that urban educated middle-class Indians are large enough in number to make a difference. Many don't realise this. Gurgaon is a classic example of this trend.

"People are so convinced that the system is against them they don't try and register as voters. If you go to government departments in Gurgaon, and see how they work, you won't want to register anybody. There is state pressure and local political pressure. In the local election office the appointee is not a CEC appointee but a state appointee and there is complete disharmony," says Kaul.

"First you go to the election office and they tell you that they don't have spare forms. There is just one so go and get it photocopied. The election office should be sued. Is this inefficiency, or is it that the man just does not want you to register?" asks Kaul.

Even if you get the form photocopied the next step is to get an affidavit made from the local court. "Each affidavit costs Rs 50 or Rs 60 and the whole day is wasted. Nobody has that much time," says Mr Madan Mohan Bhalla, secretary of the Hamilton Court RWA.

Then the photograph to be pasted on the card can be taken only by a photographer authorised by the government. After all this you stand in a queue and submit your form, but the outcome may not be what you wanted.

"Many times addresses are typed wrong or a person's gender is changed," says Inder Nath. "Once the cards are ready they are given to government teachers for distribution," says SP Malhotra, manager of the DLF Qutab Enclave RWA. "That takes time. If the address has been written incorrectly, you will never get your card."

A small number of residents braved the system. But to get new residents to really matter politically it was important to muster numbers. For that, many more had to be listed.

RESIDENTS AND PRESIDENTS

By changing the system of registration, People's Action made it easy for citizens to get enrolled. "The form could be simplified further," said Mr SP Malhotra from the RWA in Qutb Enclave. "We spent a lot of time correcting errors."

However this was not the case everywhere. In Hamilton Court, a large multi-storeyed block of apartments, residents are connected through intercom. They could easily ring up the RWA for clarifications.

What is clear is that the drive has improved the image of the RWAs among residents.



LAKSHMAN

Madan Mohan Bhalla, secretary of the Hamilton Court RWA

We are not a political formation'

Madan Mohan Bhalla, secretary of the Hamilton Court RWA, has played a key role in mobilising residents of highrise buildings. He spoke to Civil Society.

What was the response to the voter registration drive in your apartment block?

There are about 225 families living in Hamilton Court. Out of them, 245 people have registered as voters. Some had got their Voter Identity cards earlier, their own. So I believe there would be around 400 to 500 voters here. Pretty good response. We also have a floating population of about 10%, tenants or people on transfer or people who are just not interested.

Why did they not all get themselves registered in the last ten years?

Previously they had to go through a tedious process of filing affidavits. It took a of time and money. Each affidavit costs at least Rs 50 and the whole day is wasted. But now the EC has given us the power to authenticate the forms. Thanks to People's Action the process has been simplified. Also we are all connected through the intercom. Any problem in filling the form, can be clarified immediately.

The local Election office also conducts election drives? We have never heard of it.

How many residents are members of the RWA?

About 100 residents are members. But then under the new Haryana Apartment Ownership Act only the owners of apartments can become members.

What is the biggest issue affecting residents?

The road outside. It is a mess. We have been telling the administration to please repair it for the past 10 months. Other apartment blocks are also affected. We know if we have an elected representative and tell him, it will be done.

Do RWAs have political ambitions?

We are not a political formation. One of the politicians did come to our People's Action group meeting and proposed that since you are so many now we will choose a candidate from you people and you vote then vote for him. We said no thank you.

So there have been moves to co-opt RWAs politically?

Naturally. You see it depends on the numbers. The more you are the politicians get interested because it becomes a very very big vote bank. But we want bhagidari, just like Delhi, the same relationship.

"We are strengthening the RWAs and setting standards for governance," says Kaul.

Palam Vihar, for instance, has an energetic RWA, elected in April 2003. General Secretary Lajpat Gupta is an official with the Punjab National Bank and devotes his spare time to working for the colony's residents. "Right from the start we took up issues affecting residents, whether it was a storm-water drain, security or maintenance charges. People could see we were working," he says.

Out of 1,736 homes in the colony, 1,250 or more than 75% are members of the RWA. When a new family settles in, the managing committee contacts them. Every block has an elected representative who meets the new settlers. "They realise very quickly that the developer is not going to work for their interests," says Gupta, "when they face paying high maintenance charges and their grievances are not addressed, they quickly join the RWA."

C-1 and C-2 blocks are located at the far end of the colony. The RWA persuaded a resident from C-1 to join the RWA and he, in turn, went round his block enrolling members. In C-2, people are angry about a sewage pipe which spills into their area. "They too have decided to join us rather than start their own RWA," says Gupta.

In Hamilton Court, Bhalla says out of 225 families 245 people have registered. "Some had got their voter identity cards earlier, on their own. So I believe there would be around 400 to 500 voters here. We also have a floating population of about 10%, tenants or people on transfer or people who are just not interested. Overall it has been a pretty good response."

About 100 residents are members of the RWA. "But then under the new Haryana Apartment Ownership Act, only the owners of apartments can become members. This has affected our numbers," he points out.

Apartment blocks, he explains, foster closer community living. "Interaction among residents, young and old is unbelievable. We celebrate all functions and there are regular clubs. I do believe apartment blocks are more conducive to community living," he says.

In DLF Qutb Enclave, too, RWA manager SP Malhotra says 50% of residents are members.

The problems of getting new residents to join the RWA seems to be in the HUDA colonies. In Sector 23 Malkan Singh Yadav, who belongs to Gurgaon is the president. He continues to farm his tract of agricultural land in Manesar. "When people move in here I go around with folded hands asking them to join, but they are disinterested." He says there are cultural differences between him and the people who settle from Delhi in his area. People in the village greet each other, they are caring. These people are not. Perceptions vary. For instance Yadav defines, social welfare as "removing a dead animal."

But he says the issues are basically the same. "In Carterpuri village, street lights, roads, sewage and water are issues. So is it here." But lifestyles are changing. His son Satpal is studying to become a lawyer. He is disinterested in politics and feels that people are only interested in the voter identity card as a form of identity. His father agrees. "You need it to get your children into school, maybe to make a

ration card. It is the village people who really vote."

There are tensions between the villages and the new colonies. Malkan Singh points out Palam Vihar's sewage pipe is leaking dirty water. In Sector 23A the RWA president Brham Prakash Yadav complains about security. Many homes have been burgled and he blames the village nearby for it. "We wanted to make a gate between us and the village, but the villagers are not permitting us." Nearly 80% of people who have moved in here belong to Delhi, he says and he has made efforts to co-opt them by nominating two women from Delhi into the RWA as members.

In Maruti Vihar the president of the RWA it was alleged refused to endorse applications and worried residents called up Kaul asking what they should do. People's Action has offered residents facing these problems to collect at least 200 applications and these would be endorsed by them. The drive has, he points out, made residents aware of the importance of having RWAs headed by people who



Inder Nath of People's Action in Gurgaon campaigns from an auto rickshaw

The residents came on their own to get themselves registered as voters. They have a very clear intention of voting.

would work for the interests of the people. It has shaken people in older colonies of their apathy.

It is said that many of the RWAs in the old Huda sectors are led by people with political affiliations. There have been efforts by local politicians to co-opt the wealthier residents as well.

"One of the politicians did come to our People's Action group meeting and proposed that since you are so many, we will choose a candidate among you and then you can vote for him," says Mr Bhalla. "We said no thank you. We are a non political formation."

In Palam Vihar, Gupta agrees. "We would like to be a pressure group and ensure citizens get their rights from the government. We want bhagidari, just like in Delhi."

But they agree that their votes count. "Every politician knows which area is going to have a high voter turnout," says Gupta. "We can be a very, very big vote bank," says Bhalla.

RWAs deny that people want voter identity cards just as a means of identity.

"The residents came on their own to get themselves registered as voters. They have a very clear intention of voting. There is an awareness that the new residents form a very big chunk of Gurgaon. And to get grievance redressed you have to vote, there is no alternative," says Bhalla.

If you don't vote, you don't count'

FROM a dilapidated Maruti van, festooned with banners, **Sanjay Kaul**, president of People's Action, exhorted citizens of Gurgaon to register as voters. "Last chance," he said. "Make your voter identity card now. Get your rights." People emerged, braving the heat on a lazy Sunday afternoon. They collected forms and made inquiries. *Civil Society*, accompanied Kaul, as he took his message to the people.

Why have you launched a campaign to get voters registered?

Since the last ten years the number of people on the electoral rolls has remained virtually static at 190,000. Our concerns began when we started working with the Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). We all had the same problems, whether it was the builder lobby working against us or an apathetic administration. We realised the nexus between the two was strong. Frustrations built up. The point was how to get the administration to react to us?

We realised the problem was we were just not large enough to affect anybody's chances in an election. The question that arises is what does the administration have to do with elections? The fact is the administration is completely politicised. We know that this happens in large parts of the country, so it is not unique.

People have been migrating here since the past ten years.

Why didn't they get themselves registered?

I don't blame them. The middle-class does not vote because they believe their votes don't matter. Here the urban-rural divide comes into play. In sheer numbers you are not important enough to make that kind of difference. Also because of the quality of politics no decent person wants to join.

If you go to government departments in Gurgaon, and see how they work, you won't want to register anybody. There is state pressure and local political pressure. The process has been made arduous and time-consuming. You go to the election office, they tell you they don't have spare forms. There is just one and you have to go and get it photocopied. The election office should be sued. Is this inefficiency, or is it that the man does not want you to register? There is also rejection of the new settlers and some resentment.

Everything is geared to deepening divides-keeping the urban middle class, the upper class and the lower middle-class away from the electoral process.

Why is it so important for new settlers to vote now?

What is happening today is that a vast number of educated middle-class Indians in urban areas are large enough to make a difference. Many don't realise this.

Gurgaon is a classic example. This is probably the only constituency in India where the number of educated middle-class residents is more than the number of uneducated citizens. This accounts for the greater level of awareness and the possibility of dialogue between these two constituents. The urban and rural divide here is more on economic differences than on caste. Perceptions differ and so do aspirations.

When you allow rural areas to get away in numbers, then you get those policies implemented which represent their interests and not those which represent yours.

If we can make a difference to the election of candidates, then we have a chance. We can fix the city. The point is to go above the national average.

If you don't vote, you don't count. The idea of going to the Election Commission and trying to factor in some transparency was to allow civil society to get involved in the electoral process. This is why we tried to make it easier for people to get on to the electoral rolls.

Don't you need vast numbers to make a difference?

In the last Assembly elections, voter turnout was about 55%. But the difference between the winner and the loser was only a few thousand votes. It is here a difference can be made.

Isn't it necessary to involve residents of Old Gurgaon and the villages?

All politics works on representing a certain segment. You need the support of about 15,000 to 20,000 people and say what you need to say.

There is another danger. The moment politicians realise this is happening, they will try to divide you. But the

resources in Gurgaon are the same for all segments, so there are limits to dividing people's aspirations.

Why haven't you got at least 100,000 new voters?

Percolation takes time. We have realised that campaigning brings more people to register. Dissemination of information is crucial and more time is needed. Strong RWAs get in more people to register. One of the things we are doing is enshrining RWAs. Previously nobody consulted them. When we did this campaign then people got connected to their RWAs. We are making civil society active at the grassroots and strengthening the RWAs. They could have done it on their own but obviously they had some limitations. So we networked and made out a methodology for them to follow.

We also emphasised that the voter identification card is going to be the important means of identification, in future.

"One of the things we are doing is enshrining RWAs. Previously nobody consulted them. But when we launched this campaign people got connected to their RWAs."

I believe people want to vote'

THE largest number of forms for voter identity cards were submitted by Palam Vihar. There are about 1,736 houses in the colony. About 1,340 people applied in the first phase of the drive in February. During the second round, too, Palam Vihar stood first. Residents queued up outside the RWA's small office to submit forms. Many volunteered to help cope with the rush.

Lajpat Gupta, general secretary of Palam Vihar's RWA, spoke to *Civil Society* about why more residents turned up to register than in other residential areas in Gurgaon.

Why did Palam Vihar score over the other colonies?

The new managing committee was elected recently in April 2003. Right from the start we got down to tackling various problems being faced by residents and developed a rapport with them. We keep them fully informed whether it is about getting them civic amenities from the developer, settling maintenance charges or meeting security concerns.

There is a storm-water drain running through the colony which residents were worried about. We informed HUDA, contacted Ansals. People could see for themselves that we were working.

Are all the residents the members of the RWA?

Nearly 75% are members. Out of approximately 1736 houses, we have about 1250 members.

Do you need to persuade them to become members?

Primarily the Managing Committee goes around the various blocks. Each block has a representative who is elected by the residents of that block. When a new resident settles here we do contact them. The block representative also goes and meets



Lajpat Gupta, General Secretary, Palam Vihar RWA

ANMOL SIDHU

them. New residents realise very quickly that the developer is not going to do anything for their interests. When they construct a house Rs 20,000 is paid to the developer but this money is never refunded. When they are faced with paying high maintenance charges, they move to becoming members of the RWA. In C-1 block, which is at the far end of the colony and has recently got new residents, we persuaded one of them to join the RWA. He then went around to this block and got all the residents to become members.

How do you develop a rapport with residents?

Last year we organised a hugely successful Diwali mela, to which most residents came. It gave everybody a chance to socialise. We used to celebrate Dussehra also but discontinued it after an accident occurred. We found most people who joined the festivities were not from our area. But all other festivals are celebrated. We have various sub-committees, dealing with different aspects. We have an environment sub-committee. One resident Mr Rizvi, a retired official from the Ministry of Environment and Forests takes the trouble of getting 3000 tree saplings from the Haryana Forest Department every year. He gives these to the developer to plant in the colony.

Are residents interested in the voter identity card only as a means of identity?

I don't think so. People I believe want to vote. We will be launching a campaign to get people to the booths. We believe our votes count.

Do RWAs have political ambitions?

No. We are a non-political formation. We would like to be a pressure group and ensure the rights of citizens from the government. We want bhagidari, just like Delhi.

Paper worship at Mumbai's Cathedral

Deepali Gupta

Mumbai

AT the Cathedral and John Cannon School (CJCS) in Mumbai, you don't just chuck paper around. You make sure that it gets into the right bin. From there the Nature Club takes over and what would have been just so much litter gets transformed into sheets of handmade, recycled paper of the kind you would get from Auroville.

"It takes five trees to print one newspaper!" says Ruby Randhava, the teacher in charge of the Nature Club. Her message seems to have gone home. The students, on their own initiative, have been recycling paper and using it for craftwork. They sell their creations at the school fete and the money that comes in goes towards running both the Nature and the Interact clubs.

"When they proposed the idea I was thrilled. They showed me some of the things they had made, and I thought it really showed the children's concern for the earth they live on," says Mrs. Meera Isaacs, the principal of the CJCS.

The programme has helped create awareness at all levels, from the principal to the janitors. "We don't reuse 100% of the paper, but most of it now gets recycled within the school," Mrs. Isaacs says with pride.

Recycling paper is easy and requires no investment in equipment. All it takes is a milk crate, a sieve (the kind used for atta) and pieces of old cloth, such as dupattas. First all the waste paper is converted into pulp that is doused with gelatin, Fevicol or a flour paste. Then the paper is sieved and flipped on a cloth and patted till all the extra water is removed. It is then left to dry. Lastly, the dried sheets are ironed. The resultant decorative sheets are used to make

albums, notepads, tablemats and even lampshades.

This project was the brainchild of Ashmita Randhava the president of the Nature Club during the academic year 2003-04. Ironically, Ashmita joined the club because "it was compulsory for all biology students," she says. But as she went on nature trails and attended workshops her concern for the environment grew. The recycling project struck her one day when she noticed "paper strewn around the classroom." It was initiated in November 2003. Today, there are separate paper bins in every classroom, and one student from each class is responsible for collecting all the waste paper and bringing it to the club.

"We were actually quite surprised by the response," say Ashmita and Mrs. Randhava. Although the participation in actual production is limited to the members of the Nature Club, every student seems to be helping by throwing paper into the right bins.

PEACEWORKS

Team to Pakistan captures hearts and minds

Civil Society News

Kolkata

KOLKATA sent a "Peace Team to Pakistan" to win hearts and minds. The team returned triumphant.

Karachi High School had invited the Indian students to take part in the school's annual International Schools' Educational Olympiad. Almost 150 schools from all over Pakistan come to Karachi to take part in the Olympiad. The Telegraph sponsored 32 students and two PeaceWorkers for the trip.

"Crossing the Wagah border on foot was an experience in itself. Just that one stroke of paint on the tarred road had been the reason for years of hostility and animosity and the cause of so many deaths," reminisces Purni Melanie Simon, a student of Class Eleven, La Martiniere for Girls.

The Peace Team were warmly received and made many friends. "Karachi High School was like a melting pot, where no one could tell one from the other," says Melanie. "It wasn't the big things but the little things here and there, gestures and unfamiliar sights and sounds that actually caught my attention."

But after three days of fun, it was time to say goodbye and there was sadness.

"I was really moved when I was talking to Zeeshan, from Lahore," said Satwik Ghosh, a student of Class Eleven from Apeejay School. "We chatted through the night discussing our lifestyles, our feelings, our emotions and our joys when suddenly he told me 'Yaar, why did I make friends with you?' I was taken aback. Then he continued with tears in his eyes, 'after three days will I ever meet you again?'"

Melanie says all their Pakistani friends stayed up the whole night and helped them pack.

Since the trip, PeaceWorks has been and will continue to be involved in engagements centring on the experience in Pakistan. We've organised school programmes highlighting issues concerning the border, partition, displacement, and the conflict and pain these evoke. A film is being made about the trip, using footage shot by various members of the team. The students were given scrapbooks before they went to Pakistan, and were asked to maintain them. An exhibition on the trip is also on the cards, hosting photographs taken by the students and their scrapbook entries.

Students from Pakistan were extended invitations to write for the Poems for Peace anthology. The anthology is expected to comprise poems written by students from both sides of the border. The last date for entries is 30th April 2004.

School spreads light of knowledge

(Like Chiranjeev Bharati, every school has a story to tell. Tell it here in your own words, with your own emotions, as only you understand it.)

EVERY year in spring, just before the board examinations are around the corner, just when the weather is turning over from shivering cold to a pleasant warmth and just when nature is awaiting to deck herself up in a riot of colours for spring, a most austere and solemn, yet elegant and inspiring ceremony takes place at Chiranjiv Bharati School, Palam Vihar, which is called the 'Diya Ceremony'.

The diya is a little earthen lamp that dispels darkness like education dispel ignorance. To say that the 'diya ceremony' is just

another farewell to the outgoing XII class students will be to equate the extraordinary with the mundane and routine. Because the ceremony itself is unique. It is different in the spirit and the way in which it is conducted and presented.

The tone of the ceremony is set off by the backdrop of the stage which is a carefully chosen theme and lovingly prepared by the teachers every year. Some of the memorable themes chosen in the past years are "Guru Dronacharya guiding Arjun" to see the eye of the bird, a traveller negotiating the undulating desert (of life), the unfathomable depths of ocean that is at once intriguing and mystifying and the finally a tiny seed growing into a mighty flowering tree with the caring hands and attention.

The invitees to the function are the XII Std. students, their parents, prominent citizens, academicians and teachers.

The evening starts with the principal adorning

the forehead of each student with the tilak and the choir group of teachers render a touching farewell song 'Shubh Vidaa Rahiyao' or 'May you conquer wherever you go'.

Speeches of blessings and good wishes follow, from teachers, from younger students, from



The diya ceremony at Chiranjiv Bharati School

alumnus and parents. As the sun sets and the skies turn an inky blue the diya in the hand of each student of the outgoing XII Std. is lit by the principal.

On the sprawling lush lawns bright yellow marigolds form map of India where the children stand with the diyas in their hands and a lush dawn when each student embarks on an inward journey realising the importance and the responsibility of the knowledge gained in the alma mater for all.

A few words of advice from Principal NM Bhatia follow, a reminder to smoothen the onward journey of life and each teenager becomes emotional, even the naughtiest and the most ebullient ones quieten down and the invisible thread of belongingness makes them wistful.

This is the ultimate moment that is the essence of the diya ceremony at Chiranjeev Baharti School, a moment frozen in time which remains with the students throughout their lives.

SCHOOL DIARY

Civil Society

PERSPECTIVES

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

Politicians aren't always villains

UMESH ANAND

A chance invitation to a presentation by Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta prompted us to launch the Perspectives section with its focus on electoral reforms. We have had over the months several valuable contributors responding to the ideas put forth by Jayaprakash Narayan. But as the process of the Lok Sabha election gets under way, we are back with Jayaprakash Narayan, who held a conclave recently to formulate an agenda for organisations which want to intervene and make a difference right away. Excerpts from an interview that began in the elevator of the Taj Man Singh hotel in Delhi. The full text of this interview is available on our website civilsocietyindia.org.

You recently hosted a conclave of concerned citizens on the electoral process. What conclusions did the conclave come to?

The past year has seen significant political reform in India. The disclosure norms now

applicable to all candidates for elective office; improvements in voter registration; the far-reaching political funding reform law; the tightening of the anti-defection provisions; limiting of the size of council of ministers - all these are positive. Even the changes in Rajya Sabha election are in response to the real crisis in our system. The conclave took note of these and other reforms, and came to the conclusion that the time for fundamental reform of the political system is nearing. What we need is not merely a change of players, but a change in the rules of the game. The conclave decided to launch a major national campaign for political reforms. The three key reforms, among others, which we have decided to pursue are:

- Internal democracy in political parties: Particularly election of all leadership positions by secret ballot; and choice of candidates of the party by the members and their elected delegates through secret ballot.
- Some form of proportional representation mixed with the territorial constituency based First-Past-The-Post system - but with checks to ensure fairer representation and better choice of candidates, and prevent fragmentation of our polity on caste lines.
- Direct election of the heads of governments at the state level by the people, so that such a government will not be under pressure from MLAs for survival, and will be accountable to people - with checks against abuse of office.

Is there any national organisational structure for this effort? Will there be a process of continuous consultation, for instance? Is there a role for the Election Commission in this process?

The campaign will have four components:

- Communications campaign mobilising public opinion in favour of changes
- Building of a network of organisations which will promote citizen action, and capture the people's yearning for change.
- Public education and serious debate in the media and other fora to promote a search for solutions and build consensus.
- Informed advocacy to persuade political parties and law makers to legislate reforms.

The whole campaign will be coordinated by a National

Committee drawn from various organisations, individuals and state units participating in the campaign. Initially, the campaign will be centered round 8 cities and adjoining regions - Delhi, Kolkatha, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad. There will be a nodal group in each city to coordinate the campaign. There will be continuous consultation across these cities and regions, and effective national coordination in a democratic and decentralized environment. This will be a 3 - 5 year campaign. As soon as possible, nodal groups will come up in other cities and regions - Lucknow, Patna, Allahabad, Chandigarh, Ernakulam, Gawahati, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar etc.

The Election Commission and political parties are kept informed of this campaign. But the EC has a limited role in it. The reform of the political system is a national issue, and it will come about through the expression of national will, and consensus among parties and politicians. The EC's role is limited to conduct of elections and implementing the electoral law.



Jayaprakash Narayan

Initially, the campaign will be centered round 8 cities and adjoining regions - Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad. There will be a nodal group in each city.

What makes you believe parties want reform?

Quite often we fail to appreciate the complex linkages, vicious cycles and the systemic crisis that our political system is facing, and we tend to blame political parties for all the ills that are afflicting our society. As a consequence, we fail to make correct assessment of the reform efforts and fail to support the politicians in their efforts. Politicians are not always the villains they are made out to be; they are often the victims of a vicious cycle.

To cite an example, all the political parties and political leaders across the political spectrum displayed remarkable statesmanship on the constitutional amendment freezing the current strength of Lok Sabha membership for each state and the Delimitation Bill, which went largely unreported in the national media. Many political parties that would have gained substantially from regrouping the constituencies on the basis of new population statistics also observed restraint and facilitated the passage of Delimitation Bill, which maintains the current status quo.

How can citizens put pressure on political parties to change? How will your national effort connect with political parties?

It is only the citizen action, which will put pressure on political parties for ushering in reform measures. Citizen action necessitates techniques such as:

- Collective, informed assertion
- Wide dissemination of information
- Effective mass communication
- Strategic intervention

There is a popular yearning for change, which can be seen in the response of the citizens of this country seeking disclosure of candidate details and the successful 10 million signature campaign for empowerment of local governments in Andhra Pradesh. Clearly, there is inchoate discontent that needs to be tapped. There have been successes, but they are sporadic and uneven. Today's imperative, therefore, is to create institutions and structures, which will capture the

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urges/yearnings of the people and translate them into action in a coherent and concerted manner.

This whole campaign is intended to be pro-politics, not anti-political. Most middle class and media criticism of politics has tones of impatience with democratic processes and institutions. I believe that true politics is a noble endeavour and is at the heart of liberty and democracy. The national campaign will therefore engage the parties in a constructive and creative dialogue and look for win-win solutions.

In a country full of caste and religious divides proportional representation not only seems complex but may appear to many to be a step backwards.

Yes, given our diversity and primordial caste loyalties, in the PR system there is a danger of every caste forming a party and fragmenting our polity. In the post-Mandal India, this is highly probable. The apprehensions that candidates might appeal to narrow range of interests is valid. It is precisely for this reason that there is need to have thresholds of say 10% of votes in a state, for parties to get their quota of seats. This threshold will make it difficult for political parties to advocate divisive ideologies, as there is little incentive to do so. In fact, with 10 or 15 percent threshold, the number of recognised parties will reduce, not increase. PR will reward widespread support, and small, concentrated groups will have to coalesce to become a viable political force. In fact, PR, by ensuring fair representation to national parties in states where their vote share is below 30% or so, will encourage interest aggregation and consolidation of vote. In other words, PR can be a tool of unifying society. The divisive impulses can be effectively addressed by a reasonable threshold of vote requirement of, say 10 - 15% in a state, for representation.

PR has many forms. What we have in mind is its simplest variant, with voters having a constituency vote and party vote. While half the members are elected as now, the overall composition legislature will reflect the vote share of parties. Such a model is both simple and elegant.

Please tell us how you expect the direct election of the chief minister to help better governance and cleaner politics. What are the fears which keep you from suggesting direct

There is a popular yearning for change, which can be seen in the response of the citizens of this country seeking disclosure of candidate details and the successful 10 million signature campaign for empowerment of local governments in Andhra Pradesh. Clearly, there is inchoate discontent that needs to be tapped. There have been successes, but they are sporadic and uneven. Today's imperative, therefore, is to create institutions and structures, which will capture the urges/yearnings of the people and translate them into action in a coherent and concerted manner.

anism in States. The Union is the ultimate repository of sovereignty and guarantor of the constitution and our democratic governance. The armed forces are controlled by the Union. The supreme court, a strong parliament, election commission, finance commission and union executive are effective safeguards against authoritarianism in States. No elected State government has the power to undermine the essential features of the Constitution, or the basic freedoms in a democracy.

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election of the Prime Minister?

There is ample evidence to show that the parliamentary executive model which served to unite India has actually proved to be counterproductive in states. One of the main causes of this decline in politics and political discourse is the fact that the legislative office is not perceived by the candidates as well as the general public as one of law making and keeping the executive under check. The people, and themselves see legislators, as the disguised executive. The other reasons are:

- At the constituency level, the local dominant castes or groups can, and do, exercise near-total control.
- In our constitutional scheme of things, these legislators' support is critical for the survival of the government. Rarely is this support given on the basis of principles or ideology or public opinion. Invariably, there is a price extracted.
- In addition, as the local legislator is elected more as a representative of the dominant castes or groups, he doesn't stand for an ideology or a mandate or poll platform. As the political executive is drawn from those elected in this process, it is almost always certain that we have ministers, who have neither common purpose, nor larger vision, nor deep understanding of public affairs.

These unhappy circumstances lead us to the conclusion that the cabinet drawn from the legislature, and surviving at the behest of the legislators is not necessarily the most suitable model of political executive in States. There is a strong and compelling case for a directly elected political executive and separation of powers in States. The arguments against separation of powers and direct election of the executive which are valid at the Union level do not hold good in States. There cannot be any serious fear of authoritarianism in States.

What is wrong with paid voluntarism?

ANIL K. SINGH

AFTER 56 years of independence, the Government of India (GOI) has finally started formulating a National Policy for the voluntary sector.

The voluntary sector welcomes this initiative. In 1994, the GOI undertook a similar exercise and brought out a document. But the government did not implement its recommendations, except one. So why has the GOI failed to adopt a national policy? Did they not know about the size, capacity and influence of the voluntary sector? Or did the government deliberately try to ignore it?

A recent study conducted by PRIA in collaboration with John Hopkins University (US) shows that the total number of Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) in India is 1.2 million. Around 20 million people work on a paid or volunteer basis in this sector. The voluntary sector has become a powerful actor in the social, political and economic arena of India's society. Is it this realization that has made the government finally sit up?

At first glance the new draft policy text looks good. But read carefully. Voluntary action is defined as "an activity or function undertaken by a person or persons for the benefit of others without any personal, financial or material returns".

Does this mean those employed full time in this sector should have other businesses for their survival? This is an old concept of philanthropy that has lost its relevance. If this definition is accepted, the voluntary sector will lose its strength and become a puppet of the rich. What will happen to professionally managed developmental organizations, research and training institutes, advocacy and lobbying organizations? All centrally sponsored schemes being carried out by voluntary organizations will suffer badly because it would be difficult to generate the money required for paying their personnel.

INSIDE VIEW

Secondly, the draft policy talks about creating an enabling legal environment and suggests that the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), the Societies Registration Act and similar registration acts be reassessed and suitably amended since these Acts and laws have become obsolete.

Here one doubts the real intentions of the government. Amendments to suit whom? The sub-committee and Task Force set up by CAPART and the Planning Commission in 2000 recommended that the FCRA should be repealed. Several changes were suggested in the Income Tax Act including changing the definition of charity. No change was recommended in the Societies Registration Act. The government now talks about review and not about implementing the recommendations of their own committees and Task Forces. Is it because these recommendations don't match their political thinking? Or are there vested interests at work?

Thirdly, one can find a clear-cut contradiction in this draft policy. The policy mentions that the government will help people who would like to take up voluntarism as a career. How can people build careers in this sector if they are not supposed to earn their livelihood from it?

Any national policy has big implications. A policy for the voluntary sector will affect millions of people, directly or indirectly. Hence it should be drafted with greater caution. All stake-holders including state governments should be involved.

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A Sindhi and a Christian too

RAM GIDOOMAL

CONVERSION is on the agenda again, not just in India but also in the diaspora. In the UK a recent study identifies 14,000 converts to Islam, some of them high profile. Hindus have been upset by allegations that charitable funds have been used for schools that 're-convert' people. In India, Tehelka's relaunch story claimed to expose George Bush's 'Big Conversion Agenda for India', though the story appeared to be more of a fanciful conspiracy theory, playing dangerously on the old fears of the 'foreign hand'.

Religious conversion involves profound change. It can be very disruptive, both personally and socially. For me this is not just theoretical. I was brought up in a Hindu home where we also followed the Sikh way, attended a Muslim school and became a follower of Christ while a student at Imperial College, London. The impact was deep and in many ways unsettling, though I am convinced of the truth that changed me.

For most Hindus the whole idea of conversion seems unnecessary and irrelevant, though they do not oppose it. However, for some it is distasteful. Sankaracharya Dayananda Saraswati even called it 'violence... against humanity, against cultures, against religions' at a seminar on 'Violence to Human Heritage'.

A small minority go further: they are not afraid to use violence in opposing conversion. They accuse those who attempt to 'convert' people of exploitation, particularly of Dalits, tribals and women - the three groups identified in recent legislation in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. These 'Freedom of Religion' bills (following similar laws in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh) aim to prevent conversion by 'force or fraud' but have also been used to penalise those who have opted for spiritual change.

These fears about conversion must be taken seriously. But on the other hand, millions are evidently looking for change, which may include spiritual, social, cultural or economic dimensions. One million people were reported to be preparing to march to Delhi and convert to Buddhism in November 2001. In the event, in spite of the government's strong-arm attempts to prevent them, 40,000 did so: much less than a million but a not insignificant number.

Today millions more are reported to be considering some conversion, either to 'another religion' or to their own self-identified community. Why? Their primary motivation might be social, but it also includes the spiritual. Allegations that Dalits, tribals or women are being offered 'inducements' are rarely substantiated. And why assume that they are gullible pawns, who can be exploited and manipulated, rather than active participants in change? Gauri Viswanathan, author of, "Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Change," argues that conversion movements are generally movements of protest that 'unsettle the boundaries'.

We should be clear. We are not talking about conversion by force or fraud. No religious leader, from any background, supports that.

The Indian Constitution is extraordinarily well-balanced. Article 25 (1) states that 'all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion'. But it makes this freedom subject to 'public order, morality and health'. It balances the right to religious freedom with the need not to infringe others' rights nor to harm society. But it comes out clearly on the side of freedom.



Ram Gidoomal

I was brought up in a Hindu home where we also followed the Sikh way, attended a Muslim school and became a follower of Christ while a student at Imperial College.

But conversion, even when it takes place freely, without compulsion, can be a complex process. Its effects are both internal and external. Nobody opposes inner change. But we must recognise that it can have outward effects too. Change can also bring tension, when people reject old traditions or challenge the status quo. I wrote the foreword to Robin Thomson's book - *Changing India: Insights from the Margin* - which explores these complex effects more fully.

We must look carefully at these effects, not just spiritual, but also social, cultural and economic. Those who propagate their faith must make sure that their methods do not create unnecessary disruption, either to those who choose to change or to the other members of their families and communities. Respect for others' faith and culture is fundamental.

New converts can be rude and overbearing in their zeal. When I first began to follow Christ, I offended many in my family, including my mother, by insensitive comments. Despite that, over 40 members of my Sindhi business family have also followed Christ. We seek to live within our Asian, Hindu culture, not changing anything cultural. I am much more conscious of the riches of my heritage than I ever was before.

Issues of foreign finance need to be transparent. A conference on 'Diaspora-Civil Society Partnership,' organised by the Group for Economic and Social Studies (India) and India Development Trust (UK), in New Delhi, in January 2004, called for transparency in this area. This applies to funds coming for Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or any other faith-based organisations. However, it should not be surprising that people want to fund "holy buildings", preachers or other charitable institutions. People of all faiths give generously for such purposes, while some are required to do so (Jews and Christians at least 10% of their personal income, Muslims the zakat of 2.5%).

But with all these important qualifications, our society must be strong enough to allow people the freedom to make their own choices, to accept diversity. That calls for mutual self-confidence, generosity and respect from both majority and minority communities.

India, like China, is already a major player in the global economy, and even more so in coming years. That economic status does not come in isolation. It is inextricably linked to a range of factors including openness to change and the free movement of trade, labour - and ideas. These are in turn linked to freedom of choice and of conscience, at every level.

Two questions as we approach elections: Does religious conversion harm society, as its opponents claim? Or does the current campaign against conversion do more harm, by increasing tension and perpetuating the culture of religious hatred?

"Once there is development, traditional cohesion comes under stress", said Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh at an IDT-GESS conference in January 2004. The education of women is just one example of development which produces profound change - unsettling to many, but definitely desirable. He continues: "One of India's great achievements in the past five decades is that we have been able to create our own, distinctly Indian, reasonably resilient civil society... in which traditional elements have been internally transformed without conforming to the Western model, where we can be religious but still be modern and tolerant."

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Smiling spirit behind Vietnam's forests

Barun Roy

Kolkata

THEY call him "the smiling professor" because he always smiles when he talks. To millions of Vietnamese, he is also known as "Uncle." These two epithets alone describe how deeply people love and respect Dr. Vo Quy, unquestionably the single most influential force behind Vietnam's efforts to regenerate its war-damaged forests. Perhaps they also reveal why his crusade has met with such an unprecedented level of success.

This 74-year-old defender of Vietnam's forests and wildlife has spent a lifetime telling people why it is important to conserve and how they should go about it. Even now, he goes on TV twice a week with his highly popular nature-care homilies. People believe him because he comes through as an honest broker, always willing to listen. And he knows that, for any endeavour to succeed, it's important to reach out to people at their level, in the manner they will understand, because it's they who make all the difference.

"When you carry out a project in rural areas, you must first convince the local residents and secure their support," Dr. Quy emphasizes. "You have to let them decide what they need and how they want to get it. The top-down approach never works."

Dr. Quy is also known as Vietnam's foremost birdman. For almost 50 years, he has roamed the mountains and forests of Vietnam documenting the country's flora and fauna as well as more than 1,000 species and sub-species of birds. He even has a species of pheasant named after him. But it was the shock of the American war and the devastation that result from it that convinced the zoologist that a bigger task awaited him. "I thought I have got to do something to save the nature of our country," he later said.

Long years of war have left vast areas of Vietnam denuded of vegetation, and over 35% of the country is now considered unproductive wasteland. The Americans had sprayed almost 76 million litres of the herbicide Agent Orange over 27% of South Vietnam, affecting more than 2 million hectares of forest. Bombs burned down trees and left the country pockmarked with almost 25 million

hideous craters.

Even after the war deforestation hadn't stopped. As the country began to rebuild, new land had to be found for development while villagers continued to cut down forests indiscriminately to grow food and collect fuel wood. With 75% of Vietnam's fuel needs being met from forests and an estimated 100,000 hectares of forest being lost annually, it was a challenge that had to be met here and now.

If forest development has now developed into a national culture in Vietnam, it's because of Dr. Quy. It's his studies of the widespread environmental impacts of the Vietnam War that has prompted the government to launch major programmes for the country's re-greening. In fact, it was he who drafted the law on environmental protection, which the government later adopted, setting out the now widely accepted goal of taking the forest cover to 50% in the next few decades. And it was his persuasion that brought the country's first nature and wildlife reserves into being.

But Dr. Quy's conservation strategy goes beyond nature reserves and government-imposed laws. What makes it unique and a role model for others is that he has made it a people's initiative. He has travelled from village to village to tell people, in his own convincing way, why planting new trees is so important for the country and protecting natural resources is crucial for their own well-being.

Almost every school student in Vietnam today plants one or three trees each year as part of their school curriculum. The entire nation takes to tree planting during the traditional Tet (lunar new year) holidays. It is expected that the rate of new planting will go up from 200,000 a year now to 400,000 in the near future.

Dr. Quy has done something else, too. He found out early that the hungry stomach is no respecter of the envi-

ronment. So he has linked the programme directly with people's livelihood, showing them how they could make a living without having to destroy forests.

All over Vietnam, inspired by Dr. Quy, farmers are setting up tree nurseries of their own in a planting spree that's spreading like wildfire. The government gives villagers 20 to 50 hectares of denuded land for 50 years, where they plant both exotic and indigenous varieties of trees. When they harvest the timber, they give 10% to 20% of the profits to the government and keep the rest for themselves. And the patch they grow also supplies them with fuel-wood, fodder, and food.

All this has begun to bear fruit. Vietnam now has nearly 10 million hectares of natural forest, of which half is permanent. Taking the cue from Dr. Quy's work, large restoration projects are underway and the Asian Development Bank is helping to revive the vegetative cover on three vital watersheds in Central Vietnam. Villagers are consulted on how best to use and protect degraded lands. To reduce the harmful practice of slash-and-burn cultivation, forest communities and ethnic minorities are given long-term tenures on the land they cultivate.

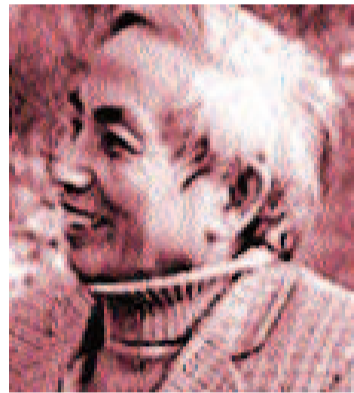
Dr. Quy, who founded the Centre for Natural Resources Management and Environmental Studies at the Vietnam National University in 1985, expects the country's natural forest cover to expand to 14 million hectares by 2010. The total forest cover, says the government, reached 35.8% at the end of 2002, expanding from 20% at

the end of the war in 1975.

"Unfortunately," Dr. Quy observes, "we have a very long way to travel before we can restore the damage done by the long, uninterrupted years of war."

That's why even at the age of 74 he doesn't think his mission has ended. With the 50 million yen he has received as the winner of the 2003 Blue Planet Prize awarded by Japan's Asahi Glass Foundation - one of many international awards and honours bestowed on him for his lifelong work - he wants to create an environmental fund especially to train the younger generation.

profile
in hope



Governments can be terrorists too

TERRORISM finally enters the European arena. Long aw aided by anxious inhabitants of major European cities, Madrid obliged as the first. But the people with their primal ancient wisdom knew the truth of what reprisals these death and destruction were for. The laws of the Universe are inviolable and they are written as much in our entrails as they are across the Milky Way. Call it destiny, fate, karma or anything, it is the inevitable unravelling of this law that we witness every day.

In a world where we flout 'human rights' at the drop of a hat we easily forget that the 'human' element must encompass the entire human race, bantu as well as the hutu, European as well as the Timorean, American as well as the Iraqi. Only when we ascribe its value to each and every man, woman and child will 'human rights' have any real meaning. Till then it is an empty phrase used by politicians, the media and all those who have vested interest and who hide behind the veil of political correctness.

Madrid was a great tragedy. It must never happen again. The Talmud, the Gita, the Bible all echo the words of the Koran when it says that to save one human life were to save the Universe. Last year, the people of Spain opposed the war. Their government did not listen. They have ousted that government. All governments which pretend to represent their people must take heed. Our primitive violent urges remain unchanged but our tech-

nologies exceed our capacity to destroy the planet that sustains us.

The scientists of the psyché tell us that violence does not exist in a void. It follows a never-ending vicious cycle. Why don't we collectively focus our resources in addressing those causes. Some even say that we will expend less resources in remedying those causes than we do in perpetuating the violence. Don't we have one Gandhi among the 6 and half billion inhabitants on this earth who can say I believe in this cause of non-violence and am willing to give my life for it - not take another's.

We know where the cowboys are taking us: to our collective destruction. We have put our lives in their hands by a chit - or is it a chad - of paper in a process called democracy. Once elected they do what they want but always in our name. Near a polling booth in Madrid a sign scrawled on sheets reads: "200 dead, over 1,000 injured, and 34.5 million Spanish voters misinformed, lied to." As polling began, the government called the demonstrations "anti-democratic". "Is there something truly horrific being hidden from us which will only emerge on Monday after the vote, when it's too late?" asked one woman.

Unfortunately, the age old positions held by govern-

ments, one of confrontation remains unchanged. Each of the European leaders made bold speeches about not giving in to terrorist threats as though there was nothing substantial to talk about, that no injustices existed.

Theses terrorists are men with lives, with families, with little children who would love to lead peaceful lives like the rest of us instead of strapping bombs on their bodies and blowing themselves up in impotent rage.

What is it that they want? Are they willing to give up the most precious thing they have - their lives - for hatred? What do the great psychologists of our times say to that question. Must we not address this as men of reason or should we let those like Aznar who has been accused, on the night before

the polls, by a spontaneous demonstration of thousands of people outside the PP's headquarters, all of them shouting "liars, users, murderers, manipulators", and "Aznar, your delusions of grandeur have led to this". Our elected leaders are not monarchs who govern by their whim, they are our servants who are supposed to carry out our will. Unfortunately, thousands of years of habit and the continuing practice of pomp and ceremony that adorn their daily lives lend them an arrogance far beyond their office. This is what must change.



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Rajagopal back at GPF

WE love tracking PV Rajagopal, the active Ekta Parishad leader. The last time we met him and his wife Jill was at the Land First Mela at Borivili in Mumbai. The Land First Mela was held to coincide with the World Social Forum and was just down the road from Goregaon.

Foremost in Rajagopal's mind at that time (see interview in Civil Society February issue) was the need to build pressure on governments and political entities to speed up the process of land distribution. He was soon to be off on a



padayatra in Orissa to make the same point.

Rajagopal is a serious critic of globalisation and his grassroots works in Madhya Pradesh has given him the position of being a civil society leader who can make a difference at election time. At Borivili he admitted that the Congress, which the Ekta Parishad had supported had been wiped out in Madhya Pradesh, but he was at pains to explain that the NGO vote (if that is what it can be called) had mattered in many constituencies.

Now we hear Rajagopal will be back in Delhi as vice-president of the Gandhi Peace Foundation of which he was once general secretary. Will this mean less grassroots activism and more policy interventions? Rajagopal once told us in an interview that head worked with the Congress, but also talked with the BJP in Madhya Pradesh. Being in Delhi after the elections will most certainly require him to draw on that rich experience.

A Ganga yatra

RAJENDRA Singh has helped revive a river, built a people's dam, shown hundreds of villages how to conserve water, but he wants to know more about the Ganga and so he is off on a journey down the length of the river. The idea is to bring national



attention to the continued neglect of the Ganga. But close friends of Rajenbhai have expressed the view that he is wasting his time because all that he will manage to stir up is some fleeting publicity which will be forgotten even as the stories and pictures about the yatra are published.

South Africa's happy show

IT went unnoticed, but South Africa's official launch of 10 years of freedom celebrations in India deserved the attention a partner country should get. It was a happy event at the Raja Bagh at the Taj Palace. The talented Hugh Masekela was flown in for a performance and soon had everyone on their feet. Leading the dancing was the high commissioner, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, herself and joining her was the minister for foreign affairs NC Dalamini-Zuma. As Masekela put it: "When our ministers get really serious they dance."



It was welcome relief from the normally staid national day events held in Delhi. There is much more of South Africa that will be in evidence in the months to come as India's alliance with that country and Barzil falls into place.

Briefing British MPs

ACTIVIST-JOURNALIST Devender Sharma was off to Britain to address the House of Commons on food security. Sharma has done much innovative work on Indian agriculture and questioned many smug official assertions on the rural sector.

Mad enough to ask for peace

UMESH ANAND

Addicted to War

Joel Andreas
Barthcare Books
Rs 120

IN the Seventies, Mad Magazine was the most un-American American export. It told you things the way Coca-Cola ads, Time and Hollywood didn't. It tore through corporate smugness, advertising slogans, political shibboleths of the right and left. It poked fun at the rich and fingered the middle class. It found space for the poor. Mad, licensed by its name, did not spare anyone.

So it was that a generation, which had never known America first hand, received a healthy dose of American anti-Americanism. It was Mad that provided the balance because it was Mad that was really quite sane.

Then somewhere along the line Mad faded away. Its insane sanity got replaced by a sane insanity. Was it the robustness of the new geopolitics? Was it the ubiquity of television? Mad's runaway irreverence got replaced by mediocre and predictable acceptance. I remember, for instance, watching the first Gulf war on television at the Oberoi Hotel in Delhi. It seemed such a clever thing to do and a whole generation has grown up thinking so. It is the same generation that has been witness to terrorists flying planes into the twin towers in New York and the mindless bombings that followed of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mad, with the status of its erstwhile avatar, was needed to provide the balance. Its crazy drawings and wacky humour would have provided a welcome dose of sanity. But even though Mad continues to be published it isn't read. Its irreverence doesn't invite the reverence it used to.

But the power of the Mad medium is waiting to

be used. *Addicted to War: Why the US Can't Kick Militarism* is published evidence of it. Joel Andreas has done what he calls an Illustrated Exposé. It is not mad, as Mad would be. But it belongs to the genre. Serving as an extended comic strip, it traces the growth of the seamless American war machine.

Andreas speaks for the America that is not normally up there on display. It is the official unofficial America. It matters and it does not. It believes in peace but it lives in a state of war. It has a President it is not proud of, corporations whose stratagems for profits it abhors. It finances an army it would rather see disbanded.

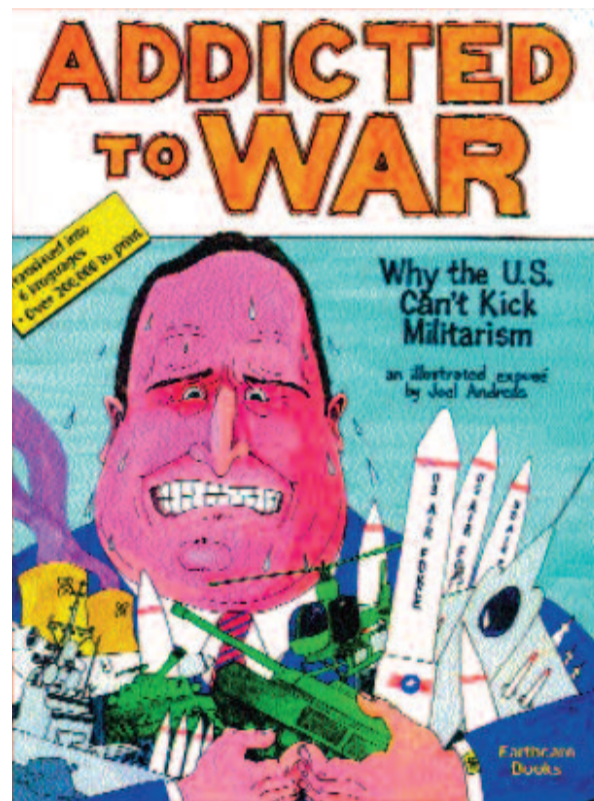
Andreas' comic is serious stuff, but it is primarily funny and bizarre. It is well researched, but it does not stray anywhere near the pedantic.

So what we have here is something, which could as easily capture the giddy adolescent as the concerned adult. It is a message of peace, a celebration of the right of the individual to safety and security. It is a scathing comment on American corporations and the controls they exercise over the political system and through the aberrations of the system the harm they perpetrate on unsuspecting people across the globe.

Andreas' contribution is in the balance he provides. For generations that run the risk of growing up with an incomplete, unipolar view of the world,

this illustrated expose will deliver to them without ostentation what they do not know. *Addicted to War* should, therefore, be picked up by schools and spread around with the intention of enriching young minds.

Bharat and Vinita Mansata deserve special thanks for bringing out the Indian edition of *Addicted to War*. They have shown once again that publishing thrives not because of its stable core, but because of inspiration in its fringes.



Andreas speaks for the America that is not normally up there on display. It is the official unofficial America. It matters and it does not. It believes in peace but it lives in a state of war.

A Calcuttan in Kolkata

KABIR MUSTAFI

LAND of my birth. A name we could all pronounce, with a real name that was the privilege of birth and belonging. But that's politically incorrect now, whatever that's supposed to mean. And we have to contend with, "Call-kauta" and such like from North Indian newsreaders (for no fault of theirs mind you). So much more civilised to say Calcutta. And, for those to whom this city belongs, a properly pronounced and private Bengali name. But no, we must now all outdo one another in thrusting our regional supremacy upon the "non-residents" of the state; see to it that "outsiders" are as little welcome as possible and make sure that they either eat dirt and conform or suffer, and too bad if you can't read a single road sign, I can.

It is stated, almost as an apology, that Calcutta is still unique, without ostentation, a poor man's city where you can still get a fish and rice meal for seven bucks and where people think little of travelling in rusty, prehistoric trams and where Barry O'Brien's minibus lexicon is broadside of some unmatched humour and where it is perfectly possible to visit an office only to find the officer concerned sitting with his back to the door, hard at work at the table, facing the wall.

But don't we remember a Calcutta with very, very much more than this? Where the food in Skyroom was the best you got between Hong Kong and Cairo? And a street so full of charm that people walked with respect and delight and infected it with their pride so that it seemed alive and the electricity and energy lit up more than the lights at Christmas? Where a haircut at AN John's was an elegant exercise without fanfare and the breakfasts in Flury's were best relished in a quiet and lengthy solitude, pen and paper by one's side and the endless faces to watch through the morning-clean plate glass windows.

Oh, Calcutta! someone once exclaimed and I echo it now at fifty, sitting far from its snaking train lines past Belur or Bali or Bordoman and the mihidana and the muri and cha; sitting too far to return and even a little held back and daunted by the new deals...multiplexes and a radical New Market and DI empty and Calcutta Club in shambles and Hide Road almost unnegotiable and the hundreds of new little businesses and the condominiums cheek by chawls, and the long, long taffic lights.

When I was a small brown pot-bellied boy I would frequently ask to be bathed in the sun. Since we didn't have a pavement and tubewell to do this at, my mother, to humour me, would draw up water in an old iron bucket, oil massage me in the verandah while I would contentedly watch the sun dancing in the blackness of the cool water, patiently waiting for it to splash over my head.

The landlord's son Lokkhoo was a very close friend and so was his little sister Ronjoo. I had heard that someone had given Lokkhoo a sister and was blissfully incurious about it. If someone wanted to give him a sister it was okay by me and I didn't need one. But one day there she was, a human! And demanding to be allowed to play! And setting up such a racket at our horrified refusal that, for all our mute pleading for understanding, we never tried it again.

Their mother, Renu mashi, was often babysitter when my more up-market parents went dancing on Saturday night or clubbing in an afternoon. And the friend that she was, the best thing she could have done for us was to just let us play. The compound was large enough to be an environmental delight and had pretty much everything small children could want. It had lizards and snakes and after dark petnis with backward feet; and guava trees to climb and young vegetables and flowers to steal and make paste of and junk to collect to build a car or make a house with; and a large, brown, high-yielding cow with her irate milker with his precious buckets of frothing warm, hissing milk and Bangshi, my personal man Friday (I thought) and Sheila his beautiful wife and the darwan and the sattu and his gamcha. And then one very early morning to leave amidst tears from grandmother and mother and the servants and a determined Bangshi and Debnath the driver taking a bus to Dum Dum airport and hardly a backward look or a real wave of goodbye, so occupied with the other little boys in blue and grey and caps and stockings and the silver Viscount at the bay and never to return again except like this, some evening, unbidden.

This is what happens when you have childhood friends who become publishers.

But here's the hard stuff. I flew in the other day and while the Eastern Bypass is a

delight and the Hyatt very nice, is the gulf now too stark for words? My hometown is probably the only city in the world where you can quite easily see a year-old baby left alone asleep in the bake of a mid-day sun on a Dalhousie pavement, encrusted by flies with a near empty begging bowl by its side which people have carefully stepped over and not kicked for that would have just been too much and a dramatically draped dead beggar hideously bandaged in blood over a pile of rubble here today and another pile on some other street tomorrow, probably in the same shirt. Idiots like me have never known who to shout for help for and in the main tip-toed past, relieved to learn over drinks that others saw the blighter too and miles away. But we don't often mention the baby.

And yet, you can see a new emergence. Young Bengali boys and girls are stepping out, trying to breach the invisible walls of the universe that is Calcutta, trying to score, to hustle like their North Indian counterparts, to get ahead in a money race too cruel to be left behind in because the window shopping has steamed up and it's become very hard to keep saying no. Especially to your self. So the young of Calcutta are upwardly mobile and the big brains still impress the hell out of anyone who is willing to listen.

At national and international debating fora, the boys and girls of Calcutta frequently flatten opposition by the breadth and depth of their thinking and reading, and their eloquence and articulation. Their literature scripts are a delight and the worst presented school magazines are almost unputdownable reads. There is a new elite rearing its head in the country and it is the skilled and knowledgeable elite. This is the elite B.K.Nehru wrote about : that true elitism was not the elitism of money or position but of personal learning and intellectual advancement. And, for all the beloved Chottos of yester-year who would have said, "Kobir, I hab sarched phor you ebrywhare," these children have tarded, pardon me, turned that tale on its head by now. So I say beware. The new Bengal tiger is still a cub but by some strange accident he has come again and it will be interesting to see whom he upstages.

True, money is almost everything in our small world up here in the north of this tempestuous country, but even here we fall back in awe before the articulate and the erudite. What remains now is to see how much of themselves these tigers-to-be are willing to give up to a skewed world that laughs at graft and encourages misrepresentation and gorges on tales of deceit and slavers with self interest. I know that in my profession of school mastering we look southwards in hope today and suddenly, with a fresh and quickening interest, again to our east. For intellectual leadership is what will save this country from ethnic cleansing and fascism and the disgrace of unequal wealth and the ooze and slime of it as it snakes through society tainting all it touches. And though the children of this end will be warm and generous and lion hearted

they have no opinion left with which to battle the shouters and the dramatists. And in the west, where the brave and the committed are among the finest, the repression of fear restrains them unless they can break free to face ostracism or leave.

So, my city, with your inimitable pulsations and equations, and priorities like nobody else's business, you are impossible like water to hold it all in the cup of the hands long enough to drink deeply from. The dim lights of the local mishtan and the BBD Bagh yell and the AJC Bose Road flyover and Calcutta Foundation and rugby and CC&FC and Future Hope all fuse together in trails like light in pictures of the dark. I wish you well. May you thrive in your new avatar and continue to give to your children, in the face of the fiercest contradictions, dreams to discuss and ideas to devour. And may they walk forth in the goodness and strength of their convictions to once again lead this country into light, at one with all the rest who may have the courage "to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong".

Someone called, Oh, Calcutta! And I have turned, listening in the breeze, to hear that call again.



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