

Civil Society

PARIVARTAN REVISITED

HOW TO EXPOSE CORRUPTION

Public hearings in Delhi have shown it is possible to use the right to information law to expose graft and forgery by government officials

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Ashok Khosla: Hitchhiker's guide to the media

PLUS: The year's essays, interviews, features and profiles

**WE HAVE
DONE
A YEAR.
THANK
YOU!**

COVER STORY



EXPOSING CORRUPTION

A fresh look at the campaign run by Parivartan in Delhi and how the public hearing has become an important tool for making the government open up.

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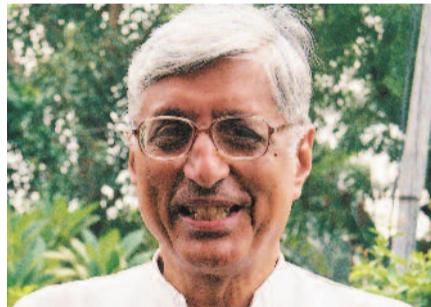
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ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL
LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

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SOME key successes of the National Advisory Council have largely gone unreported. Drafts have been prepared for two important laws: on the right to information and employment guarantee for the poorest of the poor. Both are in the common minimum programme of the Congress-led front of parties and it is a good thing that we are seeing some action. It is also significant that the ruling politicians have chosen to consult civil society. The draft laws are the work of much honing over the years and involve the contributions of many minds. If they do become legislation in their present form, perhaps for the first time will significant laws have been cobbled together by people and handed over to elected representatives for implementation. Normally, legislation is thrust on the people, full of the inadequacies that result from too little consultation.

There are huge expectations from the implementation of these two laws. The employment guarantee provisions, it is hoped, will provide minimum relief to the most needy. Right to information is intended to prise open government and make it more accountable. For all the talk of reform, the past BJP-led government chose to gloss over the most basic right of the citizen: the right to know. A wholly inadequate draft law gathered dust in the government's files and it is to the credit of the new coalition that it has decided to junk it and put in its place more meaningful legislation.

The working of the National Advisory Council also needs to be commended. Sonia Gandhi has taken a personal interest in the deliberations and spent long hours in discussion. She has chosen to be briefed by grassroot activists like Aruna Roy and Jean Dreze. Both bring to the table huge learning about Indian realities and the working of democracy in distant corners of the country. But the question now is how much of a difference will laws and the willingness to listen make to governance on the ground.

Right here in Delhi, we have the example of a good state law on the right to information being inadequately implemented. Since Civil Society's first issue in September 2003, we have tried tracking the working of the Delhi law and felt increasingly disappointed by what we have witnessed. NGOs like Parivartan have repeatedly unearthed corruption, at great personal risk, but the state government has found reasons to look the other way. Parivartan's maiden effort was to disclose through a public hearing that of Rs 1 crore worth of municipal assets claimed to have been created in a neighbourhood of east Delhi, only Rs 30 lakhs or so existed. The remaining Rs 70 lakhs had been siphoned off. There is ample documentary evidence of this fraud, but to date not a single officer of the state government of Delhi has been punished. Similar shocking revelations have been made with regard to the public distribution system and once again there has been no action.

So what we have here is a convenient little drama in which you can get information from the Sheila Dikshit government, but the omissions and commissions of officials go unpunished. Clearly, the seriousness shown at the highest levels of the Congress needs to be passed on to the party leaders in the states so that they can set examples in governance, which can than make a national difference in the fullness of time.

Civil Society was launched in September last year and we celebrate our anniversary with a fairy tale sense of satisfaction. We've decided to end the year with a bumper double issue for September and October so that we get a chance to take a much needed break. So, expect your next copy of Civil Society in November. But before we go we would like to say a personal thank you to our readers (across India and abroad now) and our advertisers for being so supportive. We are proud of our magazine, but without you we would not have been around.

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Pakhtuns are also people of peace

Civil Society News
Gurgaon

THE image of the Pakhtun community was shattered after the events of 9/11 and the US bombing of Afghanistan. As TV channels round the world, 24 hours, exposed the cruelties of the Taliban and the religious extremism of the jihadis, all Pakhtuns got tarred with the same black brush. They were painted as terrorists wedded to an archaic social order.

But even in the face of such an unthinking and biased onslaught, hope of salvaging the Pakhtun image has arrived in a book on Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, unique apostle of peace, a soul mate of Mahatma Gandhi. Written by Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, the book shows all through the freedom movement, Badshah Khan and his Pakhtun followers called the Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) diligently followed the path of non-violence even when provoked by the British.

The book is an important contribution because it comes at a time when the clash between the West and Islam has reached an apogee. It debunks stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. "There is a need to give a message that Islam is not about terrorism, nor are all Afghans terrorists," said Afsandyar Khan, grandson of Badshah Khan, who was in Delhi when the book was released. "Islam stands for peace and Ghaffar Khan, a devout follower of religion, was a true representative. Today, there is greater need to follow his philosophy of peaceful co-existence than, maybe, even at that time."

Badshah Khan fought shoulder to shoulder with the Congress. Yet in 1947, India's political leaders abandoned the Pakhtun struggle. They did not back Badshah Khan's plea for Pathanistan. Although the Congress won two elections in the NWFP, its political leaders quietly and opportunistically opted for Jinnah's two-nation theory when they sighted freedom, and forced the Pakhtuns to choose between India and Pakistan. After spending 12 years in horrendous British jails, Badshah Khan had to spend another 17 years in dank Pakistani prisons fighting for Pakhtun autonomy and dignity. His health suffered but his spirit remained intact.

In 1947, the Pakhtuns were on the threshold of creating a secular democratic state. Badshah Khan wanted to end the code of revenge between his people and he'd found an answer to that in non-violence. For Muslims, forgiveness was part of Islam, he said. He wanted women to study. He wanted the Khudai Khidmatgars to serve society and practice the values they espoused. Badshah Khan believed in secularism. To him non-Muslims were as important as Muslims. He was proud of his region's older links with Buddhism.

Instead, Afghanistan and the NWFP were destined to become, once again, the epicentre of the Great Game played out by the US and the Soviet Union. The end result was religious extremism, terrorism and the degeneration of society. The Pakhtun's more democratic ways like the jirga or his hospitality or traits of loyalty lay buried in isolated historical texts. Badshah Khan perceived all this. Two decades before he died he said:

"The doors are shut upon us, none is allowed to reach us and we have been presented as a collection of uncivilised, wild tribes."

The book will be translated into Urdu and Pashto and Rajmohan Gandhi is looking for a publisher in Pakistan. There will also be an American edition to change perceptions about Pakhtuns.

Extracts from an interview with Rajmohan Gandhi:

How can Indians keep the legacy of Badshah Khan alive?
Make Badshah Khan known in our study of history. He has been forgotten both in India and Pakistan. He is a rather striking role model.

His uncompromising stand against violence came from two sources. First, his awareness of the role that *badal* or



Rajmohan Gandhi at his home in Gurgaon.

In 1947, the Pakhtuns were on the threshold of creating a secular democratic state. Badshah Khan wanted to end the code of revenge between his people and he'd found an answer to that in non-violence. For Muslims, forgiveness was part of Islam, he said. He wanted women to study. He wanted the Khudai Khidmatgars to serve society.

revenge plays in destroying families and people. The second was his realisation that when the Pakhtuns killed any British citizen or soldier, in reprisal the British killed hundreds and hundreds of Pakhtuns wiping out villages and localities. Often the killer would escape into the caves somewhere but thousands of innocents would suffer. His non-violence came from the fact that he had to protect the Pakhtuns and yet fight for independence. It is important to note that he said he located his non-violence in Islam.

Is the Pakhtun desire for a nation still very alive?

They would like a place of honour in Afghanistan where they form a majority. In Pakistan they do feel they are dominated so they would like, not a separate country, but autonomy. A symbol would be renaming NWFP as Pakhtunkhwa. What they say is that the Punjabis have their own province named Punjab, the Sindhis have Sindh. Bangladesh was called East Bengal. But they have a province called the North West Frontier Province. In united India NWFP was located in the north-west. But in Pakistan you can't really say NWFP is in the north-west. They would like the name to be changed and they would like greater recognition and respect for the Pashto language, better administration and so on.

They also feel that the world as a whole has fastened on and encouraged religious extremism and violence. Yes, they point out, for many historical reasons there was this thing called the Taliban. For this they say other countries are also responsible. They blame the Russians, the Americans, the Saudis. They also point out within the

NWFP the Pakhtuns have not shown any propensity to religious extremism. They have not taken to the gun and have shown remarkable commitment to democratic, peaceful methods. Instances of extremist killings are relatively fewer in NWFP as compared to Punjab and Sindh provinces. They attribute this to Badshah Khan's work.

Why could the Mahatma not change the perceptions of leaders in 1947?

What events show is that even charismatic leaders, who in previous years could get unquestioned support, could not do so. Looked at very objectively I would say Gandhiji and Badshah Khan tried to teach non-violence and peace and opposed hatred. But in 1946 and 1947 there were many determined and active people in several parts who went to mohallas to spread hatred and said Hindus and Muslims just cannot live together. This persistent preaching that Hindus and Sikhs would be killed in a Muslim state or that Muslims would die in a Hindu state played a very big part. Despite their record of being able to mobilise millions of people in 1947, Gandhiji and Badshah Khan failed to mobilise people against it and the march of fate, for the moment, led to the creation of Pakistan.

Can partition be annulled?

I think whether political boundaries between nations can be erased is neither important nor necessary. What is important is for the partition in our hearts to go and for friendship to take its place. If that happens the souls of Gandhiji and of Badshah Khan would be satisfied.

Quarry ban has solved nothing, left behind suffering families

Will the Supreme Court please go back to Lal Kuan?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

HAVE you heard of a lawyer called MC Mehta who got the Magsaysay Award? Do you remember that the Supreme Court was once praised for its green judgements? Well, let us now take you to Lal Kuan, where, far removed from this heroism, former mine workers and stone-crushers suffering from silicosis await death amidst extreme poverty.

In the Lal Kuan panchayat ghar, a group of gaunt men and women squat on the floor, waiting for a government doctor, who rarely turns up. Bone thin and breathless, they show faded prescriptions with long lists of medicines. Some have TB, others silicosis or silico-tuberculosis. There are people here who had been taking TB medicines for over 20 years. They haven't been cured.

Lal Kuan is in south Delhi's Badarpur area. In 1992, the Supreme Court in the M.C. Mehta vs Union of India case ordered that the mines be closed and the stone-crushers, quarry workers and miners shifted to Pali in Haryana, to protect New Delhi's environment.

"For 30 years, I and several others worked in mining and stone crushing. We have done it all -- we crushed stones and rubble, we lifted stones and we worked at the mechanical crusher," says emaciated Gulab Devi who lost six sons to silicosis.

Every person in the room has lost near and dear ones. Entire families have been wiped out. "Over 3000 people have died," says Saghir Khan, afflicted with silicosis. "I'm the only survivor in my family of six." Death certificates are produced, one after the other.

Crushing stones releases huge amounts of silica. When workers constantly breathe this dust, the lung tissue reacts by developing fibrotic nodules. This condition is called silicosis. If the nodules become too large, breathing becomes difficult and can result in death. Usually diagnosed by X-ray, silicosis is an irreversible, disabling disease. And it takes just three years of exposure to dust for the disease to develop.

A former schoolteacher, SA Azad, chanced on the pathetic condition of the stone-crushers and other workers. He started the People's Rights and Social Research Group (Prasar) to fight for their rights. Azad sees protection of the envi-

ronment as just a ruse to pass on land to builders. The city was advancing and land prices were zooming.

Twelve years later, colonies for the rich called Rose Garden and Kant Enclave have sprung up on these devastated lands. And for the miners, it's business as usual. They have merely shifted down the road to Pali and continued to mint money. Azad says one such owner makes a crore of rupees every day. He can tell by counting the number of trucks, piled high with stones, leaving the quarry.

Not a single safety norm is being followed at Pali. Huge amounts of dust are emitted. No water is sprinkled, no machine is covered. Workers continue to labour without protective gear. "Are they not human? The Supreme Court said no bustee should exist one kilometre near the quarry. But there is one with 20,000 people. Is the environment of Delhi more

precious than that of Haryana? Is this justice?" asks Azad.

"The World Bank spends large sums controlling TB. People with breathing problems are arbitrarily diagnosed as having TB. Instead, they should spend money on occupational health, investigate the case history of the patient and then decide correctly."

Prasar's survey, conducted in 2002, revealed out of 146 workers interviewed, 83 were suspected to be suffering from silicosis and 55 persons said their rela-

AN APPEAL
Lal Kuan is in urgent need of medical help for the silicosis victims. Contact:
Azad, Tel: 26680883.
prasar21@rediffmail.com



In a quarry, other workers constantly inhale dust.

tives had died of the disease. Women who had lost their husbands to silicosis were themselves suffering from the disease. The survey revealed that the percentage of persons above 55 years in Lal Kuan was abysmally low.

Worker after worker related instances of being turned away by government hospitals.

"Hospitals are useless," says Azad. "What we need are local dispensaries."

Many now go to the government owned Lala Ram Swarup Institute of Tuberculosis and Respiratory Diseases. The institute's chest physician, Anand Jaiswal, has confirmed that silicosis is common among people in Lal Kuan and that patients are now coming from Haryana.

"As if the MC Mehta case was not



'The World Bank spends large sums controlling TB. People with breathing problems are arbitrarily diagnosed as having TB. Instead, they should spend money on occupational health.'

enough Swami Agnivesh got us classified as bonded labour. It is true the thekedars would tie us and beat us up. Swami came here and tried to give us courage. But by calling us bonded labour he took away our rights as legitimate workers," says Laja Ram, one of the workers suffering from silicosis.

The government, it is alleged, has not officially declared the Lal Kuan workers as suffering from silicosis because compensation will have to be paid.

"The responsibility of compensation should rest with the original lease holder," clarifies Azad. The quarries changed hands about three times, say workers. Fed up of official indifference, Prasar filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court in May.

His petition has sought directions from the court for the constitution of a committee to detect silicosis among the residents of Lal Kuan and the issuance of appropriate guidelines for the prevention and treatment of silicosis and other incidental diseases; the rehabilitation of persons and families affected by the disease; compensation to the families of workers who died after contracting the disease; and alternative employment to the family members of victims.

"The Supreme Court had fixed Rs 1 lakh as compensation a decade ago," he says, but the money has not been paid. "The amount should be increased to keep up with rising prices."

The workers want a school and a local dispensary. They depend on their wives or children. Although families here are much below the poverty line, they don't have ration cards. Kerosene especially is sorely needed. The women are forced to use firewood. The jhuggi fills with smoke, lethal for a family with silicosis.

The Delhi government has done nothing all these years. Workers say the social welfare department should be closed down. "The money can be used for rehabilitation," says this group of weary workers.

Nav Srishti has got girls through school. Now they are activists

6 slums, young voices, lots to tell

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A new federation called Voice of Youth is being formed in New Delhi to speak up for slum-dwellers. Most of its members are Muslim girls and they come from six slums in which Nav Srishti has been working since 1994.

Reena Banerjee, director of Nav Srishti, feels the girls and boys they have helped are now confident and educated enough to fight for their rights.

"There are laws and facilities for the underprivileged. We have to ensure that allocations are given to the right people and not just siphoned off," she says.

The federation has 60 members. Zarina from Nangloi has been elected as convenor and Neelam from Neb Sarai as co-convenor. Each group in the six bustees has launched a vigorous membership drive. Membership charges are Rs 20 and the money will be used to meet the federation's incidental expenses. Members will work as volunteers.

Voice of Youth will inform the government about problems being faced by slum communities, locally and nationally, and demand solutions. It will help youngsters get an education. The federation will seek avenues for self-employment and access to credit. It will help market products and services. The federation will also assist under-privileged youth in personality development through workshops and seminars.

Although a formal list of demands has not yet been drawn up, 23-year-old Ruby Khan, project coordinator, at Nav Srishti's Nangloi office, says one area of concern is the state of government schools.

Ruby Khan says: "Teachers must be made accountable. We also want chemist shops to stop selling drugs to addicts. We require credit for setting up small businesses and we demand better health services, especially for women."

The girls are at present mostly employed with Nav Srishti. When the NGO started expanding from its first centre at Nangloi, it needed employees who understood the community. The girls were a perfect choice.

Before they begin working in a new slum, the girls conduct a door-to-door survey to find out how many children are out of school. They talk to their parents to understand the priorities of the community.

The girls have attended workshops at which experts on HIV/AIDS, nutrition, psychiatry, education, legal services have passed on knowledge to them. They've met the police as well and the local policeman drops in to see if all is well. The federation is planning to train some youngsters as family counsellors. Thanks to all the experience and training the girls have become activists



**The girls at Nav Srishti in Nangloi (above)
Project director Suraj (left).**

elderly lady stepped forth to help. Shahjahan Apa had lost her daughter because of dowry demands. She did not want other girls to suffer the same fate. She encouraged the women to bring their girls secretly to the NGO's tiny office to study, when the husbands had left for the day.

The strategy worked and some parents began cautiously sending their girls.

Recalling those early days Shabana from the 1994 batch says, "It was very tough. Our parents would follow us to make sure we went to school. If we were a few minutes late we'd be yelled at. Some of us were even locked up. Our relatives scoffed at us: get the girl married they said." Instead, the age of marriage has increased.

The girls have all passed Class 12. Some are in college. For dropouts there is a bridge course. When the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation asked Nav Srishti to ensure 20 dropouts passed through the National Institute of Open Schools, the NGO got 60 girls to pass instead.

Every year the NGO has to wage war against government and private schools to get the children admitted. Private schools are supposed to admit underprivileged children. But very few are doing so. Suraj has been taking parents to elite schools and being turned away, every time.

"The private schools are rude and discouraging," says field worker Nazma. "They ask the poor parent to get a certificate of income from the SDM which takes all of 21 days. This year we even had to demonstrate in front of the local government school for admission." The sarkari school did finally admit all the children, so Suraj says he has no hard feelings.

The federation demands making government schools better than private schools.

"We should have structured parent-teacher meetings. We are also willing to raise justified demands of the teachers before the government." The Delhi government is now planning to link salaries to grades in order to make teachers accountable.

Nav Srishti plans to gradually phase out of Nangloi and has identified Azadnagar in Faridabad as an area in dire need of services. "Our initial survey reveals more than 60 percent of children from four to 14 years of age are out of school. Nearly all children between 10 to 14 are employed, some in hazardous industries like electroplating," says Suraj.

Voice of Youth will inform the government about problems being faced by slum communities, locally and nationally, and demand solutions. It will help youngsters get an education.

and role models for their community.

The Nangloi girls want to start small businesses in tailoring, computers and beauty care, says project director Suraj. The NGO has provided training. Two girls are working at an all-women petrol pump and some have got jobs with Domino's Pizza.

Reena Banerjee began working here because some women from the community requested her to. When she arrived, she found girls in purdah, huddled indoors. They were not sent to school and married off early. A dignified

Only stray dogs need apply here

Deepali Gupta
Mumbai

MUNICIPALITIES and stray dogs share an antagonistic relationship. The municipality associates dogs with rabies, madness and filth and is always on the prowl. At one point the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) started killing the dogs. But no matter how many they killed, they could not decrease their numbers.

Dogs are territorial beings. "Every time you kill a dog, you create a vacuum, and another dog settles in the area," says Abode Aras, CEO of the Welfare of Stray Dogs (WSD) society. Besides, breeding among dogs is so high that three dogs can become three hundred in just one year.

BMC's slaying spree attracted vociferous protests from animal rights activists. "A lot of tax-payers money was spent on killing the dogs when that never was the answer to the problem," Aras continues. People in slums and vendors on the footpath are actually dependant on stray dogs. The dogs defend their "private property."

Take, for instance, the footpath outside Eros Theatre. A boot polish wala sits there on weekdays. But when he has to go somewhere the four dogs on that street guard his belongings. Each of these dogs is named after the movie that was running at the time he got the dog.

Masha Shekhar lives in a jhopadpati settlement near Churchgate. She has a unique story to tell. She takes care of

five dogs. These dogs eat whatever Shekar can afford for the entire family. In return, the dogs watch over her hut and the children in her absence!

A slightly more philosophic member of the same settlement said, "If I don't adopt the stray dog, then where will it go? It's an animal and that's good. It will return all my favors with loyalty."

Seeing how useful stray dogs are, the WSD has taken on the challenge to sterilize the dogs, and create awareness among citizens to keep street dogs healthy without procreating. WSD takes the dogs in, based on



Mumbai's stray dogs with volunteers from Welfare of Stray Dogs.

information people (generally pavement dwellers) volunteer to them. Sometimes the dogs are genuinely ill, or they may just have maggot wounds or injuries. If the veterinary doctor is not required the team members attend to the dog themselves. Sometimes, the dog has to be taken to a kennel. At the time of sterilisation, each dog is marked with a tattoo to elicit the date of operation, the dog's location and its caretaker and this information is entered into the WSD database.

Every weekend the WSD team sets forth with lists of dog names and locations. Each dog is visited and duly monitored. These are routine checks to ensure the dogs are doing fine. Some wounds need redressing and caretakers are given medicines to keep flies and wound infections at bay.

Like many NGOs, WSD depends a lot on volunteers. The turnover is substantially high. "Nevertheless, we generate a detailed case history of each dog so the continuity of treatment is maintained," says Aras. So far WSD has been successful: the dogs are clean, the tax-payer's money is saved and the population of dogs is controlled.

WSD also encourages the adoption of stray and abandoned dogs retrieved from the streets. During adoption, members of WSD test the compatibility between the dog and the owner to be. "Economic status does not matter, we assess whether or not the person will sincerely care for the dog," Aras says with pride. Apparently, the adoption rate has been increasing over the years. Some corporates are providing financial help to WSD, so the future of Mumbai's stray dogs looks brighter.

Keeping the Indian Bustard alive

Deepali Gupta
Mumbai

SOTTED in the countryside, it is one metre tall and majestic, especially in the rain. Anyone who has sighted it has fallen in love. The Great Indian Bustard rouses passion among bird lovers and Dr. Asad Rahmani, director of the Bombay Natural History Museum (BNHS), is also an admirer.

"The Great Indian Bustard is a symbol of the Indian grasslands, and if it's lost in India, it will be forever lost to the world," says Rahmani.

The bustard is one of the 78 globally threatened birds in India, on the road to extinction. It lives on flat grasslands and sallow fields on the fringes of human civilization. The bird's main habitat is in the Thar desert of Rajasthan and five other states. The Bustard is part of an ecosystem that includes the Indian wolf, the black buck and the chinkara.

Its breeding cycle consists of about one egg a year per adult female. In a lifetime, on an average, a female lays 15 eggs out of which five grow to be adults. The natural survival rate is quite high because the bustard does not have that many natural enemies.

Unlike other species, the problem with the Great

Indian Bustard is that it is killed out of plain and simple ignorance, like the Dodo in Mauritius. "The short grass plains are of almost no importance to the government and forest department," says Rahmani. Even when the forest department benignly creates sanctuaries, they plant trees and that destroys the bird's habitat. "I would say 99 % of the short grass plains have disappeared all around the world. They have been replanted and overgrazed."



The Great Indian Bustard is a symbol of the Indian grasslands. The bustard is one of the 78 globally threatened birds in India, on the road to extinction.

As the Bustard lives on marginal agricultural fields, grasslands and deserts, where human and cattle populations are high, it is not easy to protect the bird, especially with the Forest Department's humdrum measures. Declaration of sanctuaries on private agricultural and village lands for example in Karera and

Sorsan, without taking villagers into confidence has been of no avail.

In view of the declining numbers of the bird, mainly because effective measures were not taken during the first three decades, the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) and BNHS have initiated conservation programs. After a series of successful conferences were organised by the BNHS in 1980, six states, where the Great Indian Bustard still survives, took conservation measures to protect the

remaining population of the bird. The Bustard was also declared as the State Bird of Rajasthan.

The BNHS and IBCN have been organising many programmes in the desert involving local people for the conservation of the Bustard and its habitat. In February 2000, for example, they conducted a 350 km padayatra between Bikaner and Jaisalmer to meet people and highlight the plight of the Great Indian Bustard. The aim is to develop strategies for people's participation in the protection of the bird and to motivate army and BSF personnel to take conservation measures in their jurisdiction.

Dr Rahmani hopes the government will initiate a long-term Bustard breeding programme. The programme should be strictly scientific, and instead of keeping them in zoos, the birds should be made capable of surviving in the wild.



Jean Dreze, Aruna Roy, Shekhar Singh and Colin Gonzalves during a hearing on the public distribution system at the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi.

HOW TO EXPOSE CORRUPTION

Public hearings force the govt to open up and now the NAC under Sonia Gandhi agrees to two new draft laws. But will they finally be passed?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

It was December 2002. An unknown organisation called Parivartan was holding a public hearing at Sundernagar, a resettlement colony of low-income residents, in East Delhi. Under scrutiny were the records of municipal works. The findings were stunning: of Rs 1 crore claimed to have been spent on sewers, pumps, roads and so on, there was no trace of Rs 70 lakhs. It had been spirited away by colluding officials and contractors.

Parivartan figured as Civil Society's first cover story because of its novel use of the *jan*

sunwai or public hearing as a means of complete accountability. Arvind Kejriwal, the founder of Parivartan, had taken a sabbatical from his job as an income-tax officer. His profile as a change leader and street-level activist was also interesting.

If Parivartan's first campaign explained why Sundernagar was so rundown, its second disclosure on Delhi's public distribution system (PDS) made at a *jan sunwai* this month is equally stunning. Nearly 90 percent of food meant for the poor in Delhi is made to vanish, much like those missing municipal assets. Evidence points to officials in the food and civil supplies department working in collusion with ration shop owners. The government fumbles for an answer because the evidence is so strong: it comes from the

government's own records!

How does Parivartan expose corruption? It uses three instruments: public awareness, Delhi's Right to Information Act and the public hearing. These weapons against mass corruption were first put to most effective use by activist Aruna Roy.

Her organisation, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), based in Dev Dungri, Rajasthan, showed what could be done at village level. "Corruption in the government's food for work programme in Rajasthan has come down by 30 to 40 percent because of the MKSS campaign," says Jean Dreze, economist.

A movement that started in backward Rajasthan has spread nationally. In April 2002, following drought, starvation deaths and government indifference, PUCL's Rajasthan unit filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court, arguing that the right to food is a fundamental right and that the country's gigantic food stocks should be used to prevent starvation. The Supreme Court took note and has since passed a number of noteworthy interim orders, on nutrition, midday meals and the PDS.

Activists were worried that the court's orders would not be implemented. So they began a national right to food campaign using methods developed by the MKSS. Parivartan adapted the food campaign to Delhi. Dreze and students from the Delhi School of Economics travelled to some of the remotest regions of India to see that the court's orders were complied with.

Activists also realised that a national rural employment guarantee law was needed to protect people from hunger along with a central right to information law. They drafted these laws and agitated for their implementation.

The United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress put both demands in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP). Activists and people's organisations were happy and surprised with the inclusion. Dreze and Roy are now members of the National Advisory Council (NAC) to implement the CMP. Both bills on employment guarantee and the right to information have been accepted in principle at meetings presided over by Sonia Gandhi and are expected to be law sooner than later (see interviews).

The employment guarantee bill assures 100 days of work in a year to the rural poor at the statutory minimum wage. The right to information bill forces the government to open up and be accountable. It proposes severe penalties for officials who don't provide information or give wrong information. Once passed it can be used in states which don't have right to information laws. It can also be used in preference over weak state-level legislation.

EDUCATING THE PEOPLE: Parivartan turned Sundernagari in east Delhi into a laboratory for testing out ideas on battling corruption. From this base, Parivartan spread the campaign to 15 resettlement colonies. Other NGOs followed. Anjali Bhardwaj, a former employee of the World Bank, started Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS) in South Delhi's Malaviya Nagar area after working with Parivartan for a year.

When Parivartan set up camp in Sundernagari, its residents had accepted a sorry state of affairs. Contractors descended, did some shoddy construction work and left. The ration shop owner rarely supplied food or kerosene. Everybody knew the contractor was stealing public money and the ration shop owner was siphoning grain. Nobody complained because they thought nothing could be done about it.

Parivartan began by educating people about their rights. They walked through Sundernagari's narrow lanes, singing songs to the beat of drums to drive one message home: that the government is accountable. "From birth to death you pay taxes to the government," said Anand, Arvind's colleague. "You buy medicines, you pay a tax. It's your money. So why don't you ask the government how your money is being spent?"

"Government officials are the servants of the people," said Arvind. "They get salaries from the taxes people pay. We are their masters and we can question their actions."

So if the correct amount of cement is not used for public works or if the food department does not give a poor person a ration card or if the ration shop owner claims there is no grain available, people have a right to ask why. They have the right to know and demand action.

DIGGING OUT THE TRUTH: After Parivartan's first public hearing, they had several significant successes. The Delhi government asked the Municipal Corporation to display

information about public works in each ward. The Delhi High Court directed the police to investigate charges of corruption against municipal officials based on the findings at the public hearing on municipal works. East Delhi's councillor, Ajit Singh Choudhary, agreed all plans for civic works would be vetted by local people and Parivartan.

Parivartan's right to food campaign began by listening to people's complaints against the ration shops. They were often closed, said the people. When they opened, the owner would say stocks had not arrived or everything had been sold out. Sometimes rations arrived at the end of the month when people were broke. Often stocks were of miserable quality.

Were the ration shop owners telling the truth? Parivartan assisted people in Sundernagari to use the right to information act to dig out the records their ration shop-owners are required to submit to the food and civil supplies department.

When people began reading the records, they were amazed. Those records showed that the ration shop owner was selling food grain to all ration card-holders, sometimes in excess of food grain that was allotted to him. Obviously, food was reaching the shop and being sold elsewhere at a higher price.

In east Delhi's Welcome Colony, Parivartan conducted a survey to check if information



Arvind Kejriwal displays fudged records which deprived this woman of her rations.

they had received from the records of a ration shop owner named Brahmswaroop was correct.

In June 2003 he claimed to have distributed 1,825 kg of wheat and 730 kg of rice. A house-to-house survey of 73 families revealed only 135 kg of wheat and 30 kg of rice had been actually received by the families his shop catered to. Their ration cards had the entries. So 93% of wheat and 96% of rice had been siphoned off, calculated Parivartan.

Parivartan got the records of Rattan's kerosene oil depot for June 2003. He claimed to have distributed 730 litres to card-holders. A survey of about 70 families, who take oil from his shop, indicated only 345 litres had been sold to card-holders. Nearly 55% of the kerosene had been diverted elsewhere.

By law every ration shop owner has to maintain a card register, stock register, daily sales register and cash memos. A large number of officials are supposed to keep a vigil on the ration shop owners. A food inspector is required to turn up once stocks arrive from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) for that month, check all records and sign if everything is in order. Only after this can shopkeepers sell rations.

On paper, enforcement teams visit each shop at least once a month for an intensive inspection of the records. A Food Supply Officer, Assistant Commissioner and Additional Commissioner check out a particular number of shops every month.

But the records are in a shambles. "The pathetic state of these records makes one wonder whether any kind of inspection ever took place. The brazenness with which

The Delhi law is easy to use

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

- One hundred and nineteen departments of the Delhi state government have been brought under the purview of the Act. In each department, one officer has been designated as the competent authority to accept request forms and to provide information sought by the people.
- Any person seeking information under the

Act can file an application in Form-A. Forms are available free of cost with the designated officer in each department.

● An application fee of Rs 50 per application is charged for supply of information other than information relating to tenders and contracts. For tenders and contracts the fee is Rs 500. In addition Rs 5 per page is charged for copies of documents.

● You can expect the information you seek in

15 days or a maximum of 30 days.

- If you don't get a response within 30 days, you can approach the Public Grievances Commission.
- If you win your appeal, expect the information within 30 days.
- If the information provided is false the official supplying it is liable to pay a penalty of Rs 1000 per application.
- If information is not provided and the application is not rejected the official has to pay a penalty of Rs 50 per day up to a maximum of Rs 500 per application.

'We've proved that people are capable of drafting a law'

THE Congress-led government at the Centre has been listening to people's movements and NGOs on matters of policy.

The National Advisory Council (NAC) has been set up with Sonia Gandhi presiding. The NAC meets regularly and, very quickly, it has finalised drafts for two key pieces of legislation on the right to information and employment guarantee for the rural poor. These are promises made in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the United Progressive Alliance.

The NAC includes such unlikely members as Jean Dreze and Aruna Roy, both widely respected for their grassroots work, but thus far shunned by governments.

What are the gains from this interaction? For the first time important laws drafted by people's movements are being discussed and then put up to the government. Normally, it happens the other way round.

"Frankly, acceptance of our recommendations by the NAC has been much higher than what we had expected," says Aruna Roy.

Roy is well known for having initiated and led the right to information campaign in Rajasthan under the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a movement that has spread nationally through the right to food campaign and organisations like Parivartan in Delhi. Extracts from an interview:

What is MKSS's position in relation to the government?

The MKSS has changed the nature of its relationship with the state because of its campaign on the right to information. Previously the government and its institutions did not acknowledge us or listen to us. The right to information campaign forced the government to respond to us and thereby changed the nature of our engagement. Secondly there has been a growing realisation that neutral spaces are being surrendered either to the fundamentalist forces or undemocratic forces. We are not occupying that space and this was a matter of discussion and concern to us.

Whose initiative is the current process of consultation under the NAC?

The NAC is the child of the government. It contained issues we were concerned about. The government asked us for our advice. It is an obligation to speak when they ask you to. It is entirely in the spirit of the right to information campaign, where citizens are urged to ask questions and speak up. Through the campaign we said the state is ours, this money is ours. If you don't talk the state goes ahead and does what it wishes to through vested interests. We are not paid employees of the government, we are not its members, we are not beholden to any set of norms. We are merely advisors.

So how has the dialogue progressed?

There had been so much activity on the proposed Right To Information Act and the Employment Guarantee Act (EGA) by many individuals and groups. Thousands have looked at the law, critiqued it, altered it, modified it. Therefore the ground had been prepared for us. Our legislation was well drawn up. We have established a precedent by formulating the basic law. There is a power equation in which there is

'The Left, too, has not changed the structure of governance though there is greater realism among them. The nature of governance is the same.'



a subtle but definite shift that people are competent not only to put up demands but to frame legislation.

How has the nature of engagement with the government changed now that the Congress is in power?

See, in the past, nobody gave much credit to people's movements. Political parties thought we were just playing around with toys. People's politics should be within mainstream politics. Instead, there is an obsession with electoral victory and pandering to all kinds of interests. Somebody has to deal with the politics of poverty, communalism, gender issues and oppression. All this is going to break the country.

Liberalisation and globalisation means economic space is occupied by the market. The social space is being filled by the fundamentalists. They dictate to you how you should pray, what you should wear, how to hold marriages etc. Then there are small movements like ours that do not accept these barriers and work across them. If you want real political power, work on social and economic issues. Otherwise the World Bank will dictate to you and even social issues will be manipulated by some international happenings.

What is your relationship with the Left?

People's movements and the Left are coming together. The Left is getting less dogmatic. Past paradigms are falling apart under the debris of older ideology. There is the emergence of new ideas. In a theoretical sense, they are our allies.

But the Left, too, has not changed the structure of governance though there is greater realism among them. The nature of governance is the same. In Kerala and West Bengal it is less feudal and powerful. But the right to information has not been made law in either of the two states. Governments have to be made accountable.

What are the three most important changes you have made?

We have introduced a strong penalty clause. An appellate authority outside the government has been accepted and the State RTI Acts will remain as they are for the citizens to use. Frankly, acceptance of our recommendations by the NAC has been much higher than what we had expected.



The Delhi govt has excuses and some answers

Civil Society met S. Regunathan, the affable, unflappable chief secretary of Delhi, for his views on the charges levelled by Parivartan. Regunathan has a reputation for being an upright and meticulous officer. Here is what he has to say:

- The incident of diversion of food grain meant for a fair price shop (FPS) to the Modi Flour Mill in Delhi is a stray case and for this an FIR has been lodged against the transporter and the FPS.
- It may be stated we have registered an FIR under the

Essential Commodities Act against Modi Flour Mills, JMD Traders, Rajasthan Store and Aggarwal Transport Company.

- There is a huge shortage of staff in the food and civil supplies department, which is the main constraint in streamlining the PDS. About 50% vacancies of the inspectorate staff have not been filled.
- Parivartan's claim that 90% of rations are being diverted is incorrect. Had it been so there would have been a hue and cry among the general public.
- The Department of Food and Civil Supplies is taking

steps to root out corruption. Since April 1, it has forfeited 90 security deposits of the fair price shops, suspended five licences and lodged six FIRs against the owners of fair price shops.

- The department has issued a circular directing all food supply officers to hold public hearings on every first and third Saturday of the month.
- The department is in the process of framing new guidelines for redressal of grievances, investigation of complaints and inflicting punishment on erring owners of fair price shops.

'Employment guarantee won't happen in a hurry'



ECONOMIST Jean Dreze has travelled to some of the most remote and backward regions in India to examine closely the weaknesses in government programmes meant for the poor and to take part in implementing the Supreme Court's orders on the right to food.

As a member of the National Advisory Council, Dreze finally has a chance to bring to the table his experiences and the demand for a national employment guarantee law so that people in rural areas get meaningful work.

NAC has, so far, completed a draft of the

National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill and endorsed it. The bill has been sent to the government. Excerpts from an interview Dreze gave *Civil Society*.

Do you sense any opposition?

I think sections of the bureaucracy will oppose the employment guarantee scheme and the right to information act. We also sense opposition from financial quarters because of the fiscal situation faced by the states. This is why we will continue our campaign inside the Supreme Court, the National Human Rights Commission, the National Advisory Council, and the media. We will not rely only on one channel.

How much will it cost the government? Has a figure been worked out?

Yes. Some estimates have been made. The figure comes to approximately Rs 44,000 crores per year. The economy is growing. I don't think one per cent of GDP is too much to pay to protect the masses from hunger, four or five years from now.

You would want the law implemented first in the most backward states?

In some states like Maharashtra, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand, there is good scope for labour intensive work. The employment guarantee act will be comparatively easier to implement there, especially for work on environmental regeneration. In Bihar and West Bengal the situation is different. Most lands are privatised. There aren't any huge tracts of public land, so we have to use technology creatively for employment. For instance roads and buildings can be constructed in a labour intensive manner by using compressed bricks. Bihar has an additional disadvantage as a starting point since it has poor administration.

How will you stem corruption?

The right to information is linked to the implementation of employment guarantee. Transparency and accountability have to be in place partly through right to information and partly through inbuilt provisions in the employment guarantee act itself.

In Rajasthan, go back 15 years. There was rampant corruption in programmes. About 30 to 40 percent of the muster rolls were fake. That has more or less been eradicated with the right to information law. The MKSS campaign spread awareness among the people. They know government records can be seen. It shows you can do something about corruption.

Do you expect the employment guarantee to be a permanent programme?

One of the advantages of this approach is, it is hoped, that over time it would be self-liquidating. As wages and living standards improve the number of people who want to do casual work would probably decline. But for the next ten years employment guarantee would be critical for sustenance.

How have people in rural areas reacted?

It has caught the people's imagination. Employment is always the first priority of the people. The MKSS led a truck yatra last year sensitising the people and they got a very good response. Employment guarantee won't happen in a hurry. It is a long haul. Every step of the way we have to ensure people's rights are protected. Then it has to be implemented properly. This is a long-term agenda.

You've been to some of the most backward regions in India. Is poverty going up or down?

(Laughs) This argument is a storm in the teacup. Official estimates are not dramatic at all. You're talking about people's incomes rising about 10 to 15 percent over a period of ten years. A person who was earning 3 kg of grain per day may be earns about 3.2 kg instead. Even if it's true we haven't gone far at all and we have missed so many opportunities to protect the people. I can say, post-liberalisation, the uncertainties of livelihood have increased. Because of international trade and competition certain industries have declined or closed down.

inspector not notice such a glaring mistake?

Nannu from Welcome Colony said he lost his antyodaya card and was issued a duplicate one on June 22. But his new card showed he had drawn rations in March, April and May when he didn't even have a card.

Why did food inspectors not check opening and closing stocks in the ration shops, or the records placed under their noses? They happily signed, implying everything was just fine. The food department is duty bound to report violations of the ECA Act or PDS Control Order, either to the police or to the magistrate. But officials present insisted the crimes committed by ration shop owners or officials were not that serious.

CARDS ON THE TABLE: People wanted to know why they had to bribe ration shop owners to get their ration cards. Whose responsibility was it to deliver the cards? It then transpired that food inspectors are meant to give ration cards to their rightful owners. Instead they left the cards with ration shop owners who filled them up as they pleased. Not a single person at the *jan sunwai* had received a ration card from an inspector.

Some of the poorest women were not getting Antyodaya cards. The food department would not give them application forms and asked them to produce affidavits and death certificates and prove that they really were widows. The PDS Control Order says that no person, who is eligible for a ration card shall be denied one.

The union government fixes a quota for every state government based on the percentage of people living below the poverty line. Delhi's quota is 406,000 cards. Parivartan pointed out the number of families eligible for BPL cards would be around 1.2 million taking into consideration the number of jhuggis and unauthorised colonies.

Delhi has issued 3.5 million ration cards to people above the poverty line (APL) and only about 300,000 cards to people who are BPL. "Is the PDS for the APL or the BPL?" asked Kejriwal.



Anjali Bhardwaj left a World Bank job to work for the right to information in Delhi.

BAD ECONOMICS: Satark Nagrik Sangathan asked why food supplies arrive at the end of the month when people have no money. This makes it easy for shop owners to sell off food in the black market.

The food department passed the buck to the FCI. But thanks to NDTV everybody knows where food grain goes. It travels straight to places like the Modi flour mill. Kejriwal pointed out bad economics contributes to corruption.

To move food grain from the FCI godowns to the fair price shops, tenders are floated for the transporters. The rate has been fixed at Rs 3 per sack. If one truck carries about 100 sacks of grain, the transporter will get only Rs 300 per truck for carrying goods across the city. But a truck charges at least Rs 2000. The government and the truck owners know that if stocks are delivered to the ration shops honestly, there is no money to be made.

Parivartan said if supplies do not arrive in the first week of the month, people should be compensated for each day of delay. The government may like to recover this amount from the salaries of the officials found responsible.

The president of the Ration Shop Owners' Association, Kiran Pal Singh Tyagi, said if they limited their earnings to the commission of 35 paise a kg they would make a net loss of Rs 3,000 every month. The government was therefore forcing them to be corrupt. But if their commissions were raised to 80 paise, the business would be financially viable.

The shop owners now dumped their old cronies and alleged they had to bribe food department's officials. "Every month, when we apply for our quota, we have to slip in Rs 200. And the inspector harasses us for more money," complained shop owner Rashid Khan.

While a right to information law can expose corruption, it does not empower people to take action against government officials. "This is a major gap which is emerging," said Kejriwal. "Right now, if you have a grievance, you still have to go to the food department for a remedy. We are saying that if a person's grievance has not been resolved within a particular time limit he should be able to go to the Public Grievances Commission. The commission should have the power to impose penalties on the officers recoverable from their salaries. We are also saying strengthen the Lok Ayukta Act of Delhi, so that action can be taken against bureaucrats and not only elected representatives."

The government of India spends Rs 26,000 crores annually on its food subsidy. Through the PDS it attempts to provide subsidised grains to people identified as BPL or even poorer. But the government's PDS, as exposed by Parivartan, is based on bad economics and corruption. It feeds greed, not hunger.

Monster solar lamp is a real angel

Vidya Vishwanathan

New Delhi

SOLAR power invokes a cheap image - flat rectangular panels, NGOs, government subsidies and a functional (read: shoddy) product. Gautam Malhotra, the 29-year-old CEO of Green Devices, and Tilak Lodh, a graduate of the National Institute of Design, want to change all of that. With energy prices rising, they believe there is a growing market for solar devices if they can be made efficient and trendy.

A shed at F-60 in Noida's Sector 8 is where you can see them at work. The first room has a motley collection of four tables, which were once used in an exhibition by Lodh. The tables have on them a clutter of little electronic parts and mechanical components. A lot of tinkering and experimentation clearly goes on here. Malhotra and Lodh have been working for a year to put together a product called the Monster township lamp. They have argued about the shape, the material, the technique and even something as little as a screw but now have two large confirmed orders, one for a village development project in Madhya Pradesh and another for a resort in Himachal Pradesh.

The lamp is atop a steel pole six feet tall. It has a circular fiberglass top designed to drain away rainwater. The top surface of the fiberglass case houses the solar panels. Below that is the digital circuitry and the battery pack. The narrow bottom rim of the case has a row of LEDs (light emitting diodes). This is a compact integrated light, no solar panels that stand out and no hanging wires. It looks like any regular light on a driveway or lawn and its glow has a diameter of six meters.

Solar lamps are not exactly very high tech. "But we have made some innovations and design is a big component," explains Malhotra. Traditional solar lamps have fluorescent tubes. LED technology is considered the future of lighting because it consumes much less power and has a life span of about 27 years as against a fluorescent lamp that dies in a year. The Stanford Engineering School, along with the famous Silicon Valley design firm Ideo, did a social project for lighting up

countries like India and came up with an LED-based lantern just this year. The product is funded by venture capitalist Vinod Khosla amongst others and is going to be marketed by Ignite Innovations.

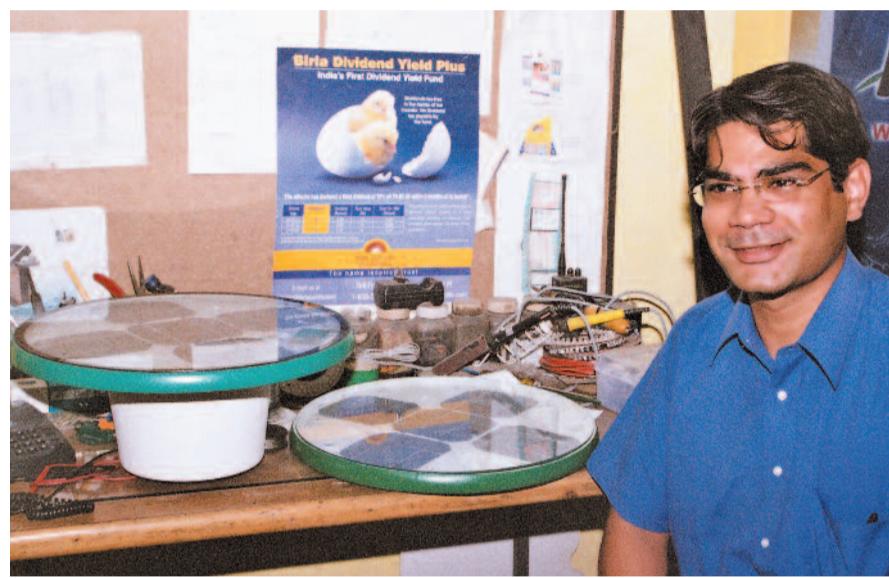
"That is a personal lantern which burns for three and a half hours. In the street lamp category we are the only product," says Malhotra who is determined to make solar

expert in optics, has designed a diffuser to make sure that all the light goes down. In fact, the entire lamp has been possible because of Lodh, who makes his living as an exhibition designer but dreams of getting into design-led manufacturing. He has tried his hand at it once before. A year ago he worked with French contractors on LEDs for a light signal for the Delhi Metro.

Malhotra who was then selling imported Chinese solar garden lights so that he could raise money for his product venture, came to him to get an exhibition stand designed. The two hit it off and Lodh held his LED signal at a distance on the road and showed Malhotra what his light could do compared to the French one.

Malhotra in turn showed him a drawing of the solar lamp that he wanted to make even though he had only Rs 60,000 in his bank and asked him if he could help. Lodh a dreamer did not know much about solar energy. But he had once built a model for generating energy from sea waves for a school project and that had got him his NID admission. Lodh not only agreed to defer his design charges but also gave the young management graduate his factory shed to operate from. The two of them assemble the electronic modules themselves. Lodh has trained his erstwhile cook (who he noticed was very deft with her fingers) in electronics too. His old employees do the metal and paintwork.

Today Malhotra is setting up a shed of his own at a cost of Rs 4 lakhs and the production there is going to be automated. He has raised some investments from his ex-boss, but it is not easy raising small amounts of risk capital even in urban India. He hopes to close this first year with a turnover of Rs 40 lakhs. The fact that his company is tiny and he has no engineering background doesn't stop him from dreaming big. He talks about the advantage of using nanotech based paints and integrating all circuitry into a chip. He has been reading and researching renewable energy for 11 years now and his father, a retired major-general has been encouraging. His practical knowledge came from a one-week training course where some German engineers taught him the basics at Mitradham in Kerala. "As soon as I saw that I knew I had to miniaturise it," he says..



Gautam Malhotra, CEO of Green Devices, and (below) designer Tilak Lodh.



The Monster lamp uses LED technology. It is six feet high and design innovations protect it against rain. No panels stand out, no loose wires.

energy a commercially viable business. He points out that their electronic circuitry works in such a way that it uses fewer solar panels (one-fourth less) and it also compensates for the lack of a slanted solar panel. The lamp turns on as the sun goes down, burns for 12 hours and regulates itself if the power is low.

These sell at a still steep Rs 6250 for a non-profit and Rs 7500 for a commercial venture. But it costs 30 paise per day to run and is clean energy. The two six volt batteries that are used are commonly available across India and have to be changed once in 18 months.

The Monster lamp has a cluster of LEDs and Lodh, an

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UK SNAPSHOT

Christ in the Asian scene?

BRITISH Asians are prosperous and influential as never before. Media hits like Goodness Gracious Me!, Bend it like Beckham and Bombay Dreams have propelled them into the mainstream. They are also prominent in business, professional life and increasingly in politics.

At the same time...discrimination is rife, evidenced in the soaring unemployment for some communities. Questions about citizenship and identity persist. The alienation between the generations was expressed most starkly in the riots in cities like Oldham and Bradford.

9/11 changed a lot. For some it meant there was no alternative to radical Islam. For others it opened up old wounds and divisions. Tensions between communities have deepened.

New immigrant groups from Europe, Africa and the Middle East- some of them asylum-seekers - are changing the community balance, just as Asians did before.

Where do British Asian Christians fit into this picture? That was the main question for delegates to a major conference in July - 'Jewels in His Crown'. Three themes came into focus:

Following Christ means serving the very varied needs of the wider Asian community, for example helping to build bridges of understanding between communities and generations.

New resources include 'Masala Groups' and 'Asian Family Matters', providing quality discussion material on a wide range of topical issues.

Sometimes it means disturbing the status quo, speaking out and acting for those facing discrimination, challenging stereotypes between Asian faith communities, or facing up to issues like 'honour killings'.

Christ's followers need to demonstrate that he is not just for the 'British' - he is for all. That means expressing faith in Asian cultural ways, retaining links with family and community. The conference saw creative examples of this in music, art and religious language.

Demand for ban on GM trees

By Sam Burcher
Geneva

In January 2004 Finnish environmental groups, the People's Biosafety Association and the Union of Ecoforestry, launched a campaign to ban GM trees. They have been joined by the World Rainforest Movement, Friends of the Earth International, ISIS, The Forest Action Network and Scottish Green Party.

The American Lands Alliance, WWF and Greenpeace are calling for a moratorium on the release of GM trees. They want a reduction of fast growing trees, further research and regulation before GM trees are manufactured in forests.

In May, during the fourth UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) in Geneva, there were demonstrations against GM trees because of the "decision" to draft plans for GM tree projects made at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-9) in Milan in December 2003.

GM trees have been included in the Kyoto Protocol as a means of generating carbon credits under the Clean Development Mechanism. Carbon credits sold in this way are not subject to the traceability legislation that applies to all other GM imports into Europe and therefore countries hosting GM trees will have no way of knowing whether their credits are GM free or not.

The hopes pinned on GM trees include slowing the progress of climate change and ameliorating the effects of mercury vapours in the atmosphere caused by fossil fuels and medical waste burning.

The plan is to "phyto-remediate" plots of land by planting GM trees that take up ionic mercury or organic mercury and convert it to less toxic elemental mercury, which can then be expelled into the atmosphere where it is supposed to become less harmful.

But this will merely relocate soil mercury from contaminated sites in the south to the north. The mercury expelled into the atmosphere will return to the soil through precipitation, and convert to its original toxic state. It will pose a threat to animals, humans and native plants.

GM trees may contain up to 50% less lignin than their conventional counterparts, which reduces the ability of the plant to reach optimum levels of fitness in the envi-

ronment. This reduced capacity leads to decreased biomass and degraded biodiversity.

It is believed that reducing lignin in trees will make wood easier and cheaper to pulp, especially soft woods and create faster growing trees. While a forest of slow decaying trees is a major carbon sink, fast decaying forests will result in carbon dioxide being returned to the atmosphere very rapidly.

The US Department of Agriculture has issued more than 300 permits for open GM tree trials since 2000 and officials are expected to grant permission to grow GM trees commercially by 2005. According to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) GM tree trials are taking place in China and Chile. In New Zealand GM tree trials are underway by Aventis and DuPont who have engineered pine trees (*Pinus radiata*) and Norwegian Spruce (*Picea abies*). These trees will be resistant to their herbicides "Buster" and "Escort". A second trial involves speeding up the growth of these GM tree species.

The introduction of "novel bio-engineered" trees into stocks of indigenous trees that "out compete" the native populations will have a disrupting effect on ecosystems and pose similar risks as GM crops, but on an increased scale. GM trees are more harmful because trees engineered to contain pesticides can harm non-target insects and birds and distribute pollen extensively. Tests have shown that pollen from pine trees can travel up to 600 km. Besides trees remain in the environment for a lot longer than seasonal crops like maize.

There is little evidence about the impact of GM trees on the soil, but there is every possibility that they may absorb more nutrients than traditional trees, and further threaten biodiversity. And it is not yet known whether GM trees can withstand strong winds, a condition of climate change.

Finnish Environmental Groups circulated an open letter to governments on the last day of the UNFF. It stated that there is no control system for GM pollen flowing with the wind or seeds transported by birds and that this "breaks with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety" the first international law to control the transportation of Living Modified Organisms (LMOs) across national borders.

Sign onto the petition: Global Ban on GM trees at <http://elonmerkki.net/forestforum>

French cool to Israeli overtures

THE dog days of August are here, but, in contrast to last year, we have not seen any major forest fires and have had to carry a light jacket in the height of summer.

It has been a hotter month in French-Israeli relations. First, we had the French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier break the mould and meet Arafat on June 29, against the express wishes of the Israeli government.

Almost alone in the transatlantic family to stand up to Israeli-American dictates, France has opened itself to the arrows of imperial rage once again. But as Nabil Shaath, the Palestinian FM, told AFP: "France is a proud country" for not giving into "straight Israeli blackmail."

Quick to react, Israel's ambassador to France Nissim Zvili informed the French Foreign Ministry that Barnier would not be welcome in Israel if he were planning to meet Yasser Arafat in Ramallah.

Sharon went a step further with a dramatic call to the 600,000 French Jews to immediately go to Israel, as France was, according to him, a very anti-Semitic

nation with its five million Arabs. (France also has the honour of having the highest Jewish population in Europe). This immediately prompted Chirac to retort that Sharon would not be welcome in France.

Sharon continued the drama with media coverage of him welcoming the French Jewish émigré arriving in Israel. On an average 2000 Jews immigrate to Israel from France.

While it is heartening to see a major western power standing up to this Iago of West Asian politics, it remains to be assessed whether we have reached the proverbial threshold.

Is this the harbinger of change or merely a storm in a teacup that will blow over as in the early months of the Bush Presidency when his feathers were ruffled by Sharon's reference to Israel as the sacrificial Czechoslovakia that Bush was

offering as an appeasement to the Arabs. Not privy to the inner workings of the Jewish lobby, lay observers saw to their astonishment Bush make a 180 degrees turn and within weeks become Sharon's best friend. We'll have to wait and see how this one turns.

The Butler Report came and went causing a minor ripple in British politics. Democracy has evolved to mirror the corporate business world it has spawned.

The leadership no longer takes respon-

sibility for even the gravest follies committed under its watch. Instead responsibility is shifted to scapegoats like when George Tenet, chief of the CIA's head rolled as he stood in for George Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.

A public soap opera follows. A make believe inquiry is created to create a sense of closure and purgation for the

populace at large. The Butler report did no less.

A week later the page was turned. Special interest groups like Stop the War group declared: "However many reports Tony Blair and his government commission on the Iraq war, one indisputable fact remains: Tony lied and thousands died."

One can sadly conclude that we the people have become amorally attached to our short-term well being and even the grossest mistake made by our leaders that led to an illegal war with tens of thousands dead and millions displaced and ruined in a country with a population the size of the UK can go by without so much as a turn of our heads.

We always get the leaders we deserve so who can blame Tony Blair for aping his Anglo-Saxon cousins across the pond. Even as obesity statistics rise alarmingly in UK in direct proportion to the number of fast food outlets, mirroring the American phenomenon we realise how politics too is becoming a Hollywood style media marketing experience.



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Civil Society

PERSPECTIVES

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

Let's build on the London Mela

RAM GIDOOMAL



Through NR Eyes

they were regular clients, the barman took one look at them and broke the silence saying, "Oi, you're Muslims, you shouldn't be here! You're not supposed to be drinking!"

When my daughter relayed this story to me I was shocked and disappointed, realising that the context for migrant communities in the Diaspora would from now be subsumed by a subtext of suspicion and that distrust would not be easy to overcome.

In fact some within the Asian communities no longer want to be identified as 'Asian' in case they are thought to be 'Muslim' or 'Pakistani' (this has nothing to do with being called a 'Paki' or a 'Paki bastard', which remains the common currency in some circles). Not that it would make much of a difference for NRIs - my daughter is a Christian and the friends she visited the pub with were Hindu Gujaratis.

So why have some young Muslims turned to violence? One reason put forward by some commentators is that young people do not see any alternative. In January 2001, Imam Rehmatallah, from Burton-upon-Trent, told my colleague: "Our young people are alienated. They are not doing well in school or finding jobs. They see no future for themselves. And we can't communicate with them." Six months later those young people were involved in the riots that broke out in Britain's northern cities. Three months after that a different group of young people blew up the World Trade Centre.

What alternative did they see? Drugs, sex, drink? Young people want something to challenge them, something that stretches their idealism in a positive manner. How do we provide such challenges and ideals?

The Christmas Cracker project, launched in 1989, in response to world poverty, gave young people the chance to be involved, to get their hands dirty, to do something for a cause that was bigger than themselves. Fifty thousand teenagers were mobilised over a seven-year period. They were given basic business skills and made aware of the issues affecting those less well off than them --- and in the process raising over £5million for



good causes in the developing world.

Another reason put forward for some young Muslims turning to violence is the discrimination and racism, perceived or actual, which hinders access to resources, jobs and opportunities. But this is not limited to young people alone. Older people still see themselves as victims of social injustice and discrimination. While many things have changed for the better, they continue to perceive this, some on a daily basis. They still feel distrust.

How do we tackle discrimination and overcome barriers of distrust? Positive examples are often overlooked. In June 2001, the focus was on the cities that rioted -- Oldham, Bradford and others. Nobody asked why Burton remained peaceful. Imam Rehmatallah told us that Christian and Muslim leaders met regularly. As soon as the riots began they got together to ensure that there would be no misunderstandings and their town would remain peaceful.

We need to identify 'peace agitators' like these and put them in touch with situations that have experienced tension, to share their insights and spread their ideas. The GEES-IDT conference on Diaspora - Civil Society Partnership in New Delhi in January 2004 called for 'twinning links between cities in India that have been identified as more sus-

ceptible to social instability and communal violence and those with good records of community relations, in order to identify sources of conflict and to establish appropriate forums and structures for inter-community relations.'

The idea could be extended to the Diaspora. A city like Leicester, with an excellent record of good relations between its many communities of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, could share a lot with similar cities in India. Such initiatives would demonstrate the power and potential of Diaspora diplomacy.

A potent symbol of the impact of the South Asian Diaspora on British life is the London Mela, which burst upon the London scene in August last year. It is the most significant South Asian festival presenting a rich tableau of colour and creativity. This year it promises to be even bigger and better comprising everything from classical music to cutting edge

urban groove, traditional dance to carnival, and mainstream pop to stand-up comedy.

The Mela will feature artists from the UK and the subcontinent and involve all of London's Asian communities, featuring work inspired and originating from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the global Asian Diaspora. Outcomes have included the easing of racial tensions and promotion of cross-cultural understanding.

All this is quite a change from the signs that once welcomed migrants to Britain with notices outside English hotels reading "No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs". These signs have long since disappeared, but the organisational networks that grew to bind these communities in the face of adversity still remain.

Integration is the key to a successful Diaspora. The challenge is for both governments to come up with a coordinated policy that engages their non-resident communities. Making the Diaspora work inevitably creates a lot of extra work - but the rewards for diplomacy, in terms of business, cultural and educational ties, not to mention a powerful and active lobby group are manifold.

RAM GIDOOMAL CBE is Chairman, South Asian Development Partnership.

Massigaon: No topsoil, no rain, no jobs

MILINDO CHAKRABARTI



Reforms Report

for? How are they managing their lives? How are they trying to cope with the 'reformed' situation? I'd like to provide you with a first hand impression of the sufferings, struggles, innovations and conflicts resulting from such a quest for reforms.

We shall take a trip to Massigaon village, located in the Eastern Ghats, in the Boipariguda block of Koraput district of Orissa. Although the Google search engine returned about 625 entries for "Koraput and poverty", the official website of the district (<http://koraput.nic.in/history/history.htm>) claims it to be "paradise on the earth". There are reports of hectic activities of several NGOs with financial support from international donor agencies and UN organisations, coupled with tall claims by government officials about regular distribution of grains at subsidised rates to hundreds of families identified to be living "below the poverty line". Yes Koraput, along with Kalahandi, is one among the seven poorest districts in India.

Massigaon is a village of 102 households. Out of a population of 588, around 40 percent are literate. Of the 97 households that own land and are engaged in cultivation

FINALLY, the need for reforms with a human face appears to have attracted the attention it deserves. The June issue of Civil Society carried a long wish-list of what is to be done put forward by a host of eminent Indians who genuinely dream of a better and prosperous India and look forward to such prosperity really improving the lives of those belonging to marginalised sections of society.

What is the status of the people we have been arguing

of? How are they managing their lives? How are they trying to cope with the 'reformed' situation? I'd like to provide you with a first hand impression of the sufferings, struggles, innovations and conflicts resulting from such a quest for reforms.

There is a patch of forest of 90 acres lying at the edge of the village. The entire land is owned by the forest department. The villagers took an interest in protecting about 60 acres of forest and the remaining 30 acres have been lying degraded to facilitate grazing of their own cattle. The forest department, till recently, showed no interest in protecting and managing these degraded acres.

However, lately it has initiated efforts to bring this land under a state-sponsored Joint Forest Management programme. The degraded forest has a top soil cover of 1.8 cm, whereas the well-stocked areas record a top soil cover of 6.6 cm. Organic carbon availability in the top soil is also lower in the degraded forests. Standing biomass in the well-stocked forests has been estimated at 465.62 cubic metres per hectare, while the comparative figures are only 14.36 cubic metres in the degraded forests.

The people residing in this tribal village – 83 percent of households belong to the scheduled tribe – define a wealthy family as one that has a considerable amount of beda land (suitable for cultivation, with assured availability of water) and the necessary money to carry out agricultural operations. Those who are landless or cannot produce food to sustain themselves for more than three months are poor. By these definitions, seven of the households are poor and only three are wealthy.

We met Radi Harijan. She is one of the seven poor households identified by the villagers, even though, believe me, her husband inherited three acres of cultivable land – turned permanently fallow due to lack of water. The family earns a living by working on other

fields and collecting kendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) leaves and other edibles from the forests nearby. Yes, Dudu – Radi's husband – paid Rs 700 for a bride when he got married. The older two of the four children are going to a primary school located within the village.

Radi's family of six sustain on a daily expenditure of around Rs 25, out of which around Rs 20 is spent on food – less than Rs. 4 per head per day. They can afford to spend about Rs 400 a year on clothing and about Rs 50 on medicines. The annual income of the family is around Rs. 9,500. For the sake of comparison, the per capita monthly income works out to be less than Rs 132.

How do they earn their living? Dudu is an agricultural labourer, managing wage employment for around five and a half months in a year. He receives an average daily wage of Rs 25 a day. Radi gets employment for 70 days a year, at a daily wage rate of Rs 15. For about two weeks Radi collects kendu leaves and sells them at Re 1 per 80 leaves, to get richer by about Rs 600. To increase their income, Radi and her family gather firewood from the forests in excess of their subsistence requirements and sell it in the local market to earn around Rs 3000 rupees.

In a village mostly inhabited by tribal households, Radi is a Dalit. She and her family do not have the right to enter the well-stocked forest protected and maintained by the villagers. They have formal access only to the degraded forests and collect whatever is available there. Others won't even have a glass of water from them.

Any reform measures intended to build a prosperous India have to take care of these ground level realities. Economic measures are necessary to help Radi send her children to high school. Her family needs more income and more employment. In the absence of irrigation, Radi needs help to use the land she owns for growing trees. Socio-political measures are needed to empower Radi to claim access to forests managed by the community. For reforms to succeed, they will have to touch Radi's life.

(Milindo Chakrabarti is director, CREATE. milindos@hotmail.com)

Get on with Whistleblower's Act

MAJA DARUWALA

DID Satyendra Dubey die for nothing? The honest and upright young Deputy General Manager of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) was killed last November in Bihar's Gaya district after he complained to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) about huge irregularities and corruption in the former Prime Minister's pet project. Dubey knew the risk he was taking. He knew he was a vulnerable and easy target. He knew he was fighting the powerful construction mafia. He knew he had to be afraid. In his letters he begged his name be kept secret, but the bureaucracy didn't bother to honour his request.

The death of a young IIT graduate led to widespread public protest. After some unseemly dilly-dallying, the Vajpayee government ordered a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe. This instilled some hope in a cynical public more used to little coming of probes and commissions. But that was six months ago. The latest conclusion is that Dubey's whistleblowing on wrong doing in NHAI had hardly anything to do with his death even though he clearly anticipated this outcome himself. The new theory is that Dubey was killed while resisting some sort of robbery.

The CBI says it has arrested six persons including the man who apparently pulled the trigger. They have retrieved Dubey's cellphone and brief case carrying family photographs, some official papers, a mobile charger and a bunch of keys. Those in custody could have got them from a robbery or from an obliging third party wanting to muddy a trail or get rid of hot property. It's probably too soon to say. To bolster the robbery theory the CBI points to a watch they say belonged to Dubey. But things are never so simple. There is Dubey's agonised brother Dhananjay who says that in fact Dubey never wore a watch.

There are the other tragedies surrounding the CBI investigation that seem to make little news and less sense. Pradeep Kumar, the lone rickshaw-puller and a witness to the murder has 'disappeared' after his statements were recorded in Delhi while two other suspects Sheonath Sah and Mukendra Paswan committed suicide within hours

of being interrogated. How did the CBI lose a prime eyewitness and fail to keep him safe in protective custody? The CBI now has three deaths and a disappearance to unearth. How are these multiple tragedies going to be explained? The way events are being played out reflects poorly on the integrity of the investigation. And to make matters worse, the new government recently made a shocking claim that Dubey never asked for his identity to be concealed even though his first two letters to the PMO had implied the need for confidentiality.

India does not have a whistleblowers protection law yet. Since the Public Interest Disclosure and Protection of Informers Bill, 2002 is still being examined, the centre has agreed to make the Central Vigilance Commission, the sole authority for protecting future whistleblowers.

A properly implemented whistleblower's act would make a dent in corruption if a law was passed ensuring the safety of people wanting to tell on others who were being wicked. A witness protection program is likewise essential to nab powerful evildoers. Evidence of the subversion of justice abound. We need go no further than the now famous Best Bakery case to see the naked aggression with which wrong doers can intimidate - as the transfer of cases out of Gujarat implies - as well as the complicity of the authorities. India does not have a witness protection programme like the US, nor does our criminal penal code carry any provision concerning this.

In Dubey's case just laws and procedures will not recompense his supreme sacrifice at the alter of integrity. What price will be paid by those that breached the confidentiality that Dubey pleaded for? Where is the rickshaw puller who vanished? Why did two perfectly ordinary people commit suicide after a short interrogation? And who are these six new people in custody now? Will they too come to a sticky end? Dubey and people like him are too precious to be forgotten. Someone has the answers and the public is waiting for the truth. (Maja Daruwala is director, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative)

Drought-proof is also flood-proof

RAJENDER SINGH

**Paani**

In August, large parts of India were under drought and at least one-tenth was under floodwaters. The landscape of the country is being etched either with drought or floods. Our political leaders are busy announcing gigantic projects like interlinking of rivers and inter-basin water transfers as the remedy to these critical problems. But such solutions will only help politicians, contractors and officials make money and lead to problems like the recent imbroglio over the Sutlej-Yamuna link canal in Punjab.

About 150,000 villages have no water source while thousands of others are declared flood-prone. Since Independence, an astronomical sum of money has been spent by the government on drought relief. Yet the impact of drought relief works on drought prevention is negligible.

Drought and floods are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. If taken up judiciously, both problems can be addressed with the same intervention.

In 1995-96, Alwar in Rajasthan received more than twice its average annual rainfall. In places where water conservation measures were in place, the surplus water was trapped and it seeped into the earth. But in areas where there were no water harvesting structures, the same amount of rainfall caused floods. Consequently, the government had to spend Rs 150 crore on flood relief there.

The excess rainfall of 1995-96 was conserved in our area. The water percolated into the earth and the Arvari river began to flow perennially after a long long time. Since the past six years rainfall has been deficient. The same excess water, trapped in 1995-96 is sustaining all of us. Despite receiving less than half of normal rainfall, agriculture has done all right. There is enough fodder, grain and water available in our area.

Even in the past, drought was frequent, but the village community had its own methods of coping. Rainwater was religiously collected in bawadis and jhalre. These structures also served as temples.

Not just physical labour but social and cultural efforts were made to cope with drought and famine. Even marriage decisions were influenced by the prevailing drought situation. Drought-affected families used to migrate with their cattle to their relatives in areas that had received their normal share of rain. An ethos of tolerance and humanity in our society made it much easier to cope with drought and famine.

But things have become lopsided today. There is growing tension between migrants and inhabitants leading to strained relationships. As a result, the impact of drought on people has become much more severe. A particular section of society is citing this adverse impact as an excuse to loot drought relief funds.

Drought relief work is executed in such a way that no one is held accountable for the loot. Whenever we ask a sarpanch carrying out drought relief work about the expenditure details, the stock answer one gets is that drought relief is meant to provide only succour and no work is expected. This money, which is withdrawn from the government's treasuries on the basis of thumb impressions, finds its way into the pockets of a particular section of society.

The government's drought relief work is affecting the people in two ways: first they witness rampant corruption and a decline in public morality and secondly they confront the stark reality of deprivation.

If the money currently spent on drought relief is given directly to villages, they can undertake water conservation and even help other areas become drought-proof. Work

carried out in this manner will be sustainable and its impact more visible. The village community will appreciate its own responsibility and devote itself to water conservation. Collective effort is required for water conservation. For achieving results everybody has to work as a team, keeping in mind local knowledge. That is the only way to save our nation from the fury of floods and drought.

The role of the government in drought prevention is primarily of providing support. Their task is to motivate people, help them plan and support projects based on people's priorities. The work should be carried out by the people, not by the government. The need of the hour is to recognise the capabilities of the people and their knowledge systems. People have performed miracles in water conservation, whenever trust was reposed in them.

Based on this pattern, 750 villages in an area of 6,500 sq. km in Alwar have achieved great results after working for over 15 years. Their region was once a dark zone in government records (an over-exploited ground-water region). Even drinking water was insufficient.

Today, the same area has been designated a "white zone". There is adequate water in wells and enough available for agriculture and drinking purposes. Barren lands have become fertile. The people launched a campaign to save fish and eventually took over the management of river bodies.

This is the only region in India where the people themselves have set up a unique river basin organisation, called the Arvari Sansad. This Sansad has direct representation from 70 villages and it has devised norms for members on water resource management.

The honourable former president of India KR Narayanan visited Hamirpur on 28th March, 2000, to meet and honour the people who are the true architects of this transformation.

But the government remains unimpressed. This area of 6,500 sq km, which has received less than half its normal rainfall in the last three years, is unaffected by drought. There is no need for any drought relief work here. There is a lot of talk about this success but the government and its bureaucracy remain insensitive and unwilling to learn.

But civil society wants to learn from village communities in Alwar. Wherever there is a drought, people affected by it are keen to invite these villagers so that they can undertake similar works. For the same reason people are visiting this area to see things for themselves, to understand the transformation and to replicate. Such invitations have come from people in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and other regions of Rajasthan. Kutch, Saurashtra, Sirohi, Barmer, Bikaner, Pali, Mansoda, Khandwa, Jhabua, Mandala, B h a d r a , R a v a t m a l , Medhals...these are some of the regions where people want to learn.

Villagers from these regions would like to take up water and forest conservation but the government is creating hurdles for them. Despite obstacles, small efforts by these people back in



In 1995-96, Alwar received more than twice its average annual rainfall. In places where water conservation measures were in place, the surplus water was trapped and it seeped into the earth. But in areas where there were no water harvesting structures, the same amount of rainfall caused floods and Rs 150 crore was spent on flood relief there.

their villages are a beacon of hope for the future.

Instead of supporting community initiatives, water-related policies and laws stymie peoples' initiatives. That's what is presently happening in our country. Top leaders talk about self-reliance and gram swaraj for the village and on the other hand the executives of the government hamper the growth of such efforts. Our experience tells us that the only way to deal with drought is complete preparedness. Society must contribute. And government support should reach the people in rural and urban areas, honestly, directly and easily.

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

Strong Lokayukta is the best answer

ARVIND KEJRIWAL



The Right To Know

Nagar used the Delhi Right to Information Act to know when was it repaired in the last three years. They got a rude shock when they were told that the road was last repaired about a month back and had been repaired almost seven times in the last three years. This was a fraud because the road had not been repaired for the last several years. The stock register showed material having been issued from time to time for the "repair" of this road.

The people complained to the Deputy Commissioner of that area, CBI, and several other vigilance and anti-corruption agencies. But nothing happened to anyone. Not even an inquiry was ordered. One of the most important reasons why corruption has grown is that it is almost impossible to get any action taken even if one has solid evidence. More

WHERE does a common man report corruption in this country?

The role of people in our anti-corruption efforts has been largely neglected. All our vigilance and investigative agencies put together cannot match the information that the people have on corruption. With an efficient Right to Information Law in place, people can even dig out unimpeachable evidence. But where do they report corruption?

A road in Pandav Nagar in East Delhi was in a very bad condition. Residents of Pandav

than anyone else, the corrupt know this very well.

Parivartan obtained copies of all the works carried out by the MCD in two areas in Delhi and found a shocking state of affairs. Payments had been made for 29 electric motors. None of them were actually installed. Out of 29 hand pumps paid for, only 15 actually arrived. Sixty-eight contracts worth Rs 1.3 crores were examined. Items worth Rs 70 lakhs were found missing. This report was submitted to the Chief Minister, Chief Secretary, MCD Commissioner, CBI, anti-corruption branch of police and many other authorities. No action was taken against anyone in the next one and a half years. When Parivartan filed a PIL in Delhi High Court, MCD responded by saying that they had carried out their own enquiries into the allegations made by Parivartan and had found all allegations baseless. One of the judges remarked how could a thief be asked to do one's own enquiries? The Court directed Delhi Police to hold enquiries and file a chargesheet against guilty officials within six months.

But how many people and organisations can approach Delhi High Court? The distressing aspect is that the entire anti-corruption set up has failed to contain corruption on its own and when people report corruption, the entire machinery gets into action on how to hush up the enquiries.

There is a very strong need for a body, which is independent of the government, can be easily approached and which can investigate corruption and deliver judgements quickly. The institution of Lokayukta was created precisely for this purpose. The Lokayukta is normally a retired judge of a High Court who can only be impeached through a motion of the Legislative Assembly. A candi-

date is chosen through a process of consultation involving the leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of the High Court. All this imparts a reasonable level of independence to this institution.

The institution of Lokayukta was created to hold its own investigations on allegations of corruption received from the public against elected representatives, and in some states bureaucrats too. The Lokayukta is expected to fix responsibility and recommend penal action against the guilty.

But this institution has remained a non-starter in most of the 14 states where it exists, except in Karnataka. This is because the Lokayuktas have not been given necessary powers to fulfill their responsibilities. For instance, in the case of Delhi, the Lokayukta has the powers to investigate allegations of corruption against elected representatives only. The Act specifically debars him from entertaining any case against a bureaucrat. The corruption of elected representatives is so intrinsically linked to that of bureaucrats that it is impossible to investigate corruption against an elected representative without investigating against some associated bureaucrats. This has rendered the Delhi Lokayukta totally defunct. According to the figures provided by his Secretariat, the Delhi Lokayukta investigated just one case in the last five years after spending Rs 1.25 crores on its establishment.

Governments realise the potential of a strong and effective Lokayukta. Perhaps that is the reason why the Central Lokpal Bill, which was introduced in Parliament in late 60's, is still languishing.

Arvind Kejriwal is the founder of Parivartan, a young NGO campaigning for the public right to information in Delhi

Beware the costs of water privatisation

AMEER SHAHUL

Tis well-known that 1.5 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water in the world today. The United Nations predicts that at least two-thirds of the world's population will face shortages of potable water by year 2005. This is a challenge for the global community, but transnational corporations have turned it into an opportunity. Profit thirsty transnational companies have earnestly started pursuing their interests in making water a commodity by lobbying with multilateral funding agencies. In the process, water has become important for capital as it is increasingly characterised by a crisis of scarcity, and scarcity is the basis of modern capitalism!

Transnational corporations in connivance with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have been trying to influence governments of third world countries to open the control of water to private parties. This has seen the emergence of a spectrum of privately funded bodies like the World Water Council, World Water Commission, World Water Forum and Global Water Partnership to lobby for the privatisation of water.

The world's largest water companies, Suez and Vivendi Environnement, France and British Thames Water, owned by German RWE AG, have expanded into every region of the world in the last 12 years. Saur of France and United Utilities of England, working in conjunction with Bechtel of the US, have successfully secured major international drinking water contracts. Water-related revenues of Vivendi Universal, the parent partner of Vivendi Environnement, grew from over \$5 billion in 1990 to over \$12 billion in 2002.

In the same period, RWE, which moved into the world water market with its acquisition of Britain's Thames Water, grew from \$25 million to \$2.5 billion. These six companies, which were present in about 10 countries at the beginning of the last decade, have extended their

drinking water distribution networks to at least 56 countries by the end of 2002.

The consequences of water privatisation are devastating. One clear example is that of Bolivia. Under insurmountable pressures from multilateral funding agencies like the World Bank, Bolivia privatised water, leading to a situation where water became more expensive than food.

Dolphin Coast in South Africa is another case, where local councils commercialised water, making it necessary for local residents to pay the full cost of safe drinking water. People turned to other avenues for water, as water charges became unaffordable for them. As a result, by August 2000 the worst ever cholera epidemic broke out killing as many as 300 people and infecting over 25,000.

India's National Water Policy 2002 amply demonstrates the efforts of these lobbyists. The policy mooted private sector participation in 'building, owning, operating, easing and transferring of water resources facilities' with a 10 year tax holiday for investors and implementing agencies.

These broad guidelines were strictly adhered to by subsequent state policies in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra when these states started giving more priorities to the private sector.

We have also witnessed the Chhattisgarh government seeking to lease out the Sheonath River in Durg district to Radius Water Ltd. for a period of 22 years. It would have prevented people living on the banks of the river, from drawing water and fishermen whose livelihood was solely dependent on the river from fishing in the river!

Ironically, the former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, while launching the National Water Policy 2002, had said: "The cornerstone of the new National Water Policy should be an explicit recognition that water is a national resource and ...the policy should also recognise that the community is the rightful custodian of

water. Exclusive control by the government machinery, and the resultant mindset among the people that water management is the exclusive responsibility of the government cannot help us to make the paradigm shift to participative, essentially local management of water resources. Both the central and the state governments should, therefore, actively seek the involvement of the community at all levels".

What was actually being mooted was 'commercialisation' of water. The policy questioned the fundamental rights of the people by providing for private control and by asserting that water is an 'asset'.

The existing threat in India is from multinational cola companies. They have been extracting ground water from close to 88 locations in India directly or through franchises and selling it to the same people whom they deprive of this natural resource at a rate of Rs 12 for a litre of plain water and Rs 30 plus for the same quantity of aerated water. Compare this with the price of Rs 12 for a litre of milk and Rs 40 plus for a litre of petrol. It is surprising that of the 88 locations these two companies bleed for ground water, resistance has come only from Palakkad in Kerala and Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh.

The main reason is that the people of these two regions have come face to face with the harsh realities of exploitation. Palakkad area has been exploited by the two cola companies on the myth that Kerala is a water rich state. But the reality is entirely different. Even with an annual rainfall of 3,000 mm on an average, Kerala villages face severe water shortages during the summer months. Many villages depend on ground water to tide over water shortages. Palakkad district is one such area.

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Mosley mantra to make school happier for all

Civil Society News
New Delhi

RESEARCH shows emotionally stable children score better grades and do well in life. But every classroom has children with different personalities. There is the occasional bully, the bright spark and the shy one. Many times teachers don't know how to tackle personality problems without lowering a child's self-esteem.

Jenny Mosley, a cheerful educationist from the UK, has lots of great ideas to build emotionally stable schools. She is the founder of the Quality Circle Time Model for classrooms and whole schools. The Teacher Foundation in Bangalore invited her to conduct a series of workshops for school-teachers.

Quality Circle Time is a model which enhances self-esteem, emotional intelligence and team work among students and teachers in schools. The model helps to improve relationships within schools so that the Whole School's Behavior Policy becomes inclusive, positive and caring.

Managing large classrooms and long-winded syllabi is very stressful and Mosley's advice to school teachers is to take good care of themselves. "Help yourself before anyone else," she said to a workshop in Delhi. "A life outside the classroom, meditation, a self-care plan are essential. You can only do the best you can, under the circumstances. Time for unwinding is time well spent."

She demonstrated Circle Time with a group of adolescents from Delhi Public School, Ghaziabad. The children trooped in nervously and sat around in a circle.

After the introductions they played games. One game involved clapping and following instructions at the same time. Children learnt to use physical and mental skills since quick thinking was required. Other games taught children to sub-consciously help each other, or the joy of working collectively. The children were all smiles and began to talk frankly.

Golden Rules extend these values into other areas of school life. Staff and students draw up rules like "Do be honest," or "Do play nicely with other children," and display these in every area of the school.

Mosley also emphasised the value of a lunch time policy. Many times during recess, children don't know how to make friends or feel left out or don't know how to face other aggressive children. Schools need to intervene unobtrusively and create quiet spaces for children who want them. Some suggestions which have been implemented in the UK include a "football parliament" to ensure the game is not disruptive, or a "task force" to ensure children are gainfully employed during the lunch hour.

For children who are very emotionally disturbed she recommends "tickable targets" or small tasks which are very achievable and raise the child's self-esteem.

School teachers who attended the Delhi workshop found it enormously useful. Some said they'd like to implement a break-time policy. Others said they would be making staff meetings more meaningful and begin using politer forms of expression.



The Intel clubhouse at Govindpuri, New Delhi.

How Pushpa Biswas went to Boston

Vidya Vishwanathan
New Delhi

THIRTEEN-year-old petite and dusky Pushpa Biswas is dancing away on the deck of a yacht moored in the Boston harbour. She cuts a tiny figure alongside a strapping youth. We can't get the voice to play on the video, but this clearly looks like quite a party. And it must be especially so for Pushpa, who comes from the slums of Govindpuri in Delhi.

We are watching the film at Katha Khazana, an NGO run school in Govindpuri, where Pushpa studies. Pushpa with her schoolmates spent all of nine days in Boston in July thanks to Intel's Clubhouse programme.

"I worked at the Media labs in MIT on a GIS (geographical information system) project. We mapped all the malls, tall buildings and famous areas in Harvard Square. Tripti, an Indian studying there, helped me," says 16-year-old Khem Kanth.

"I designed an auditorium and a conference hall for a community center using software called Professional Home Design. Pushpa and I worked at the Boston Science Museum," says Kamaal Quadri, even as his proud instructor, Raina, plays a 3D picture of the boy's design on the small screen of a Sony handicam.

The three teenagers were among 200 children at the teen summit held at Boston by Intel, which flew in children from clubhouses across the world. The first clubhouse was set up in 1993 at the Boston science museum in collaboration with Media Labs. The idea was to create an after-school fun learning environment for underserved children.

In 1999, Intel committed to set up 100 such facilities across the world and tailor each to local needs. It equips these clubhouses with state-of-the-art Pentium four PCs and other digital gadgets like videocams, digicams and digital microscopes. There are two clubhouses in India - one at Katha and the other at Children's Love Castle foundation in Jakkur, on the outskirts of Bangalore. Adesh Prakash, Revathi Rani and SV Sunil from Jakkur too flew to Boston this summer.

There were children from 15 countries at the Boston party. "Just like us, many could not speak in English fluently," says the reticent but extremely observant Pushpa. "We used a lot of body language but there were also translators. The kids spoke in Palestinian, Spanish...."

Revathi a student of class nine, worked in the fashion design track held at the Tufts University. "We designed

two dresses. We pitched in ideas, chose and cut cloth, sewed it up and made two dresses -- a silver coloured cotton dress and a silk one. One girl from South Africa and another from Taiwan modeled in them on the project presentation day," giggles the effervescent girl.

The Boston outing has been a life changing experience for the children. Khem talks of joining the Indian Air Force and flying planes but candidly admits that he never dreamt that he would get inside an airport, let alone fly in a plane. Being in two of the world's biggest airports and seeing 150 or 200 planes at a time was way beyond his imagination. Pushpa was more touched by the Americans. "They never talk to you like you are a stranger. They are expressive, polite and respect each other. They even praise each other" is her observation. "They think time is very valuable. Even if they have an hour off from work, they jog or run and concentrate. They don't hang out talking rubbish like here," adds Khem.

Kamaal was dumbstruck by the Boston drivers. They would spot pedestrians approaching the pavement from afar and stop at a distance to let them pass. Pushpa never heard a car horn there.

Anjan Ghosh, Director, Public Affairs at Intel, is responsible for the company's non-business programmes, including community initiatives, government and education. Ghosh spoke on Intel's experience with the clubhouses and other experiments to use technology for learning.

What is the objective of the Intel clubhouses?

The clubhouses are an experiment. We think that technology is a strong motivator for learning. We have data points to prove that it motivates dropouts to go back to the main stream. The learning here is not confined to academics and so it expands the creative process.

What is the learning method?

If you notice the computers are in clusters. So it promotes co-operative learning. Each cluster is equipped with a digital microscope. The children for instance can scan a sample of drinking water. The Bangalore clubhouse has a music studio with keyboards and mixers along with a tabla and harmonium. It also has Lego blocks. The children create a local newsletter supported by advertisements from nearby shops. The idea is to experiment with what technology can do to add to the productive dimensions of the underserved children.

Lights, action, camera, activist AIDS film

Susheela Nair
Bangalore

A film about HIV/AIDS among cine workers in the Kannada film industry has finally caught the attention of bigwigs. Called Deepadadiya Kathalu (darkness below the lamp), the 30-minute documentary has been produced by Shamaantha, a Kannada journalist and activist with Saarathi, an NGO.

"The plight of cine workers is akin to truck drivers," says Shamaantha. "The film industry is a very peculiar profession. People work long hours under constant stress. Women join because of the glamour. Most are destitutes, widows or sex workers. They are exploited to the hilt and end up as commercial sex workers."

Lack of social security, abject poverty, long working hours, irregular employment and low wages plague the workers.

According to a baseline survey carried out by Saarathi, film and TV employ over 100,000 people in Karnataka. Cine workers are at the bottom of the heap.

Languishing in penury, one of the workers died in a

park in Gandhinagar without treatment. Two have died so far, this year. "These people were not even aware that they were infected," says Shamaantha.

Her film is the first ever attempt to project these problems. Released by TRU (Forum For True Films), the movie highlights ignorance of the disease among stuntmen, junior artistes, make up artistes, light boys and cameramen through a series of interviews.

Working on a shoestring budget it took just 30 days' of hard work for Shamaantha and her small crew to produce reel footage.

The idea of a documentary germinated when Shamaantha realised that she had a social responsibility to lend a voice to cine workers who go unsung.

A chance meeting with an artiste revealed that many cinema workers were abysmally ignorant of AIDS. They were in the dark about how HIV spreads and the precautionary measures to be taken.

The documentary has interviews with Dr. H. Sudarshan, director of Health Task Force, Karnataka, actor Ashok and producer Sa Ra Govindu.

While Ashok stresses the need to educate cinema

workers on AIDS and HIV as "many of them are illiterate and work for long hours for a meagre amount", Govindu says the plight of workers is pathetic as they are employed seasonally just for 10-12 days in a month.

The film also explores the intricate relationship between health, dignity and human rights, and elucidates the harsh realities of AIDS. It highlights the urgent need for action, compassion, and commitment to counter what has become the worst ailment in human history.

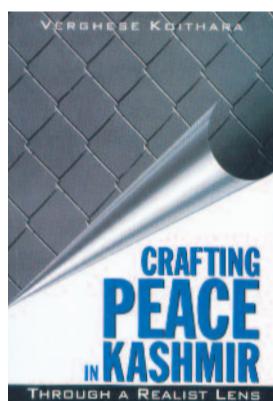
The film ends with a question as to who is responsible for taking the message of this unorganised sector to policy makers? Is it the duty of the Film Federation, NGOs or the media?

A local Rotary club wants to screen the film in schools, colleges and clubs. K.C.N. Chandrashekhar, a leading film producer and distributor, has agreed to show it around and support it.

Shamaantha is now planning to produce more films on the plight of cine workers in the Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Bengali film industries.

A fresh look at Kashmir

VIDYA VISHWANATHAN



Crafting Peace in Kashmir - Through a realist lens
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HOW did a Vice Admiral turn academic? Ask Verghese Koithara and his face breaks into a smile. "You want to ask how a sailor like me ended up writing a serious book?"

Koithara, who studied for a PhD during his last years of service, says his interest in Kashmir's peace process stemmed from his research on nuclear strategy. In 1990 when Pakistan went nuclear, he started thinking. It began to worry him that people did not understand the dangers of nuclear weapons. It struck him that Kashmir was the heart of the dispute.

Nearly 45 years of nuclear build-up in the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union lead to nuclear deterrence. This is often mistakenly translated to imply that India and Pakistan will not use their nuclear weapons, either. Koithara points out that the US and the former Soviet Union never ever fought each other. China, the other nuclear power, and the Soviet Union had minor skirmishes but never really fought a war. India and Pakistan are the only two opposing nuclear powers that have gone to battle. Anywhere from 35,000 to 60,000 soldiers have been killed. The author argues that nuclear attack is highly possible because it is an asymmetric confrontation.

The author, who considers himself a liberal, says hawks in the security establishment believe coercion will work. He thinks mindsets should change and instead of confrontation there should be cooperation. Koithara says this is viable because people of both countries are very receptive to each other in individual capacities. Even in Northern Ireland where there was deep hatred between the Catholics and the Protestants, a carefully crafted agreement ended conflict. And unlike Palestine and Israel, neither India nor Pakistan need Kashmir for their survival.

Koithara's solution to peace is to make the LoC a

permanent border but as part of a broader deal. The Pakistani army will have to first sell this idea to its people and India should help. "Each country takes its cue from the media in the other country," he says. India will have to give autonomy to Kashmir and arrive at a workable deal with Pakistan and moderate opinion in the Valley.

The author supports the idea that both armies should get off the Siachen glacier. To avoid tension, there should be large zones on either side of the new border that are demilitarised or have restricted army presence. People from the two Kashmirs should be allowed to crossover freely. They could be issued identity cards but pre-issued visas are not required. Economic dynamism with Pakistan must be a crucial component of the peace strategy.

Koithara also envisages a role for the US. Although he cautions that the long term strategy of the US will have to be watched, he believes it is in the interests of the US to keep its economic ties with India intact and engage Pakistan to make sure that Kashmir does not become a nuclear flashpoint. American mediation will be bitterly opposed in India.

The author says the purpose of writing this book was to provide a resource to a wider section of people. "In the West, civil society consists of 90 per cent of the population. In India, it is only about ten percent. Security concerns in India are considered high table discussions and left to an extremely small population. But if civil society is sensitised, an atmosphere conducive to peace can be built up. Today elections in this country are not lost or won because of security issues." Will the book create a peace movement? Unlikely. That kind of movement will come from a new generation in India and Pakistan which can thumb its nose at the establishment.

Listening to the unheard scream

PANOS Institute provided fellowships to journalists to explore problems related to the reproductive health of women in India. The experiences of the journalists have been published by Zubaan in a book called, "Unheard Scream: Reproductive Health and Women's Lives in India." Edited by Mohan Rao, who teaches at the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health in Jawaharlal Nehru University, the book has 13 essays.

Though much ground has already been covered by NGOs on reproductive health, the journalists capture reader interest. Sreelatha Menon describes how bicycle pumps are used to insufflate the abdomen of poorer women to carry out laparoscopic sterilisations in unhygienic camps in Uttar Pradesh. KPS Basheer, tells the story of Malapuram in Kerala where the age of marriage among Muslim girls has actually declined because families marry them off to men working in the Gulf. The impact of globalisation is explored by TR Rajalakshmi's investigation of women workers in India's booming garment export industry. Rupa Chinai writes about the effects of depleting forests and lousy health infrastructure on women in Nagaland. Other essays include one on the infamous quinacrine sterilisation scandal, female foeticide in Punjab and so on.

The essays once again describe the effect India's crumbling health services has on women and the need to regenerate the environment, improve education, empower women. What we need are imaginative solutions which can change ground realities, large scale. Certainly as women begin to enjoy more freedom and the right to choose, they opt for small families. But if they want more children, so be it.

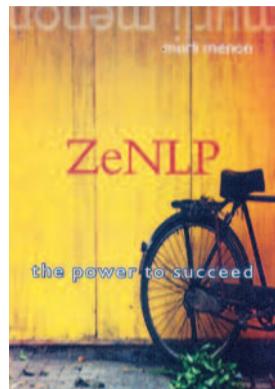
POSTER COMPETITION

Burning Brain Society is conducting a poster-making competition on the theme "Ill-effects and consequences of tobacco" and invites entries. One competition segment is open for people up to 25 years of age and the other is a non-competitive segment open to all age groups. Last date for submission of entries is

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Be a better manager, plant a tree today

RITA ANAND



ZeNLP: the power to succeed
Murli Menon
Sage Publications
Rs 185

SPIRITUALITY is attracting more and more attention in the corporate world and it's easy to see why. If you want to succeed, change the way you think. And if you can find a guru who can tell you how, it is easier to embark on the road less travelled.

In recent years management schools have come in for a good deal of criticism. It is said they churn out employees not entrepreneurs. But businesses run as much on gut and

instinct as they do on rational choices and predictability.

Murli Menon teaches people to listen to those inner voices. His motivational workshops are based on Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Zen meditation techniques. Blue chip companies invite Menon to de-stress their CEOs and managers. When we met up with him he was off to do a workshop for Jubilant, a chemicals company. But his list of clients includes schoolteachers, NGOs, government officials and spastics.

NLP regards the mind as a computer. If you want your PC to work differently, then you have to change its software. To make you think afresh, Menon relies on auto suggestion, visualisation, meditation, mantras and even tree planting. Wisdom from the Vedas and tribal traditions has been culled together.

Does it work? The answer comes from Murli Menon's life. On January 1, 1995, Menon, then a product manager with Astra Zeneca, was returning from a New Year's eve party when he was hit by a truck. The accident caused brain haemorrhage and paralysed the left side of his body.

No doctor was willing to predict when and how Murli would recover. He was prescribed strong anti-epileptic drugs. But Murli was made of different stuff. He had undergone training in Neuro Linguistic Programming and was doing Zen meditation before his accident. He was sure his mind would heal his body.

So he began practising NLP techniques: visualisation, chanting, tribal meditation. It took him four months to recover without any medication.

Murli stepped out of the corporate world to spread his knowledge. He discarded his suit for a flowing kurta-pyjama and comfy sneakers. In the beginning, his methods were looked upon with scepticism. Today his workshops of 20 participants with their spouses, are not only motivational, but great fun as well. Books and pencils are banned. You get to plant your own tree, chant a special mantra and follow your dreams, seriously.

Menon has recently published a book explaining his techniques. It is a step by step guide which anybody can use to rid the mind of cobwebs.

A valuable lesson is that trust matters a lot in business. Communicate in a language which touches emotions and you are sure to get a response. Some react to pictures, others to sound or to touch. According to Murli's Internet survey, 35% of Indians respond to visuals, 35% to sounds and the rest are sensitive to touch.

The book is interspersed with thought provoking sto-



Murli Menon: "Those who tend to their saplings find that their trees grow fast and so do their careers."

ries from Zen and older Indian texts to make you pause.

Ancient wisdom perceived the universe and humans to comprise earth, water, air, fire, ether and believed there is a healthy balance between man and nature. Zen meditation involves finding out the element dominating each individual and then connecting it to liberate cosmic energy.

Murli believes dreams are important signposts. He lived with tribals in Simlipal forests, Orissa to understand their perceptions. If you remember a dream, then it means something, he believes. Significant events are often predicted in a dream.

Negative thoughts can be silenced by chanting mantras. They silence the inner voices inside your head and provide coherence in thinking. Murli chants the Gayatri mantra. But again your special mantra is based on your individual make up.

Tree plantation meditation is an equally important therapy since harmony with nature releases cosmic energy. Each individual has an affinity to a particular tree.

The book has a list of trees with their particular qualities. Trees should be watered at sunrise, followed by a session of visualisation and meditation. "The faster the tree grows the quicker you will achieve your goal," says Murli.

There are practical lessons to help you remember names of people. A helpful diet chart is provided. Murli insists on vegetarianism: eat healthy, think better. Zen meditation techniques are detailed and management lessons from animals: dolphins, gulls, owls and ants.

Murli Menon is a compulsive traveller. He could be on a Himalayan trek to Kailash Manasarovar, stopping on the way to pay his respects to the mighty Om Parbat, the source of kundalini. Or he could be off for a workshop for managers. Civil Society met up with him in Delhi:

Is your book only for managers?

No. It is meant for everyone: housewives, schoolteachers, NGOs or anybody who wants to learn about NLP and increase their spiritual quotient. I have even helped to motivate a sculptor.

Have you tried motivating government employees?

Yes. We have conducted workshops for IAS and state level officials in Karnataka, Orissa and public sector employees. We get feedback from them. They follow diets we prescribe and send photographs of their trees. Those who tend to their saplings find that their trees grow fast and so do their careers.

Aren't there lots of management institutes which tell people how to succeed?

Most produce managers not entrepreneurs. Intuition and creativity are supplanted by cold logic. Good luck and that gut feeling play a big role in success. Traditional entrepreneurs never went to management schools. You can use NLP scientifically by visualisation. Management institutes could also benefit by inculcating some successful traditional methods into their courses. Take for example the Marwari system of accounting. The Arthashastra could be designed into management courses.

You really believe in dreams?

If you remember a dream it serves a purpose. Even if it's a pin dropping it does mean that a forthcoming event is going to cast its shadow. I stayed with the Simlipal tribals in Orissa to study their attitude to dreams. Tribals are highly evolved.

Each individual has an affinity to a particular tree. Murli Menon's book on ZenLP has a list of trees with their particular qualities. Trees should be watered at sunrise, followed by a session of visualisation and meditation.

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

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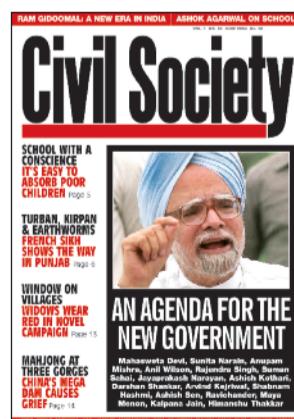
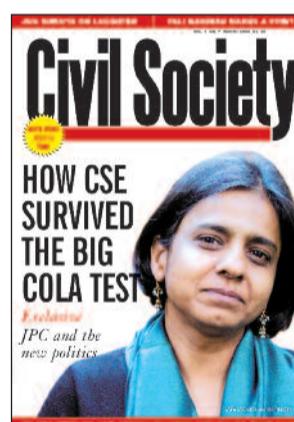
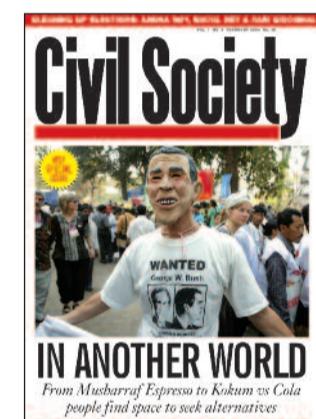
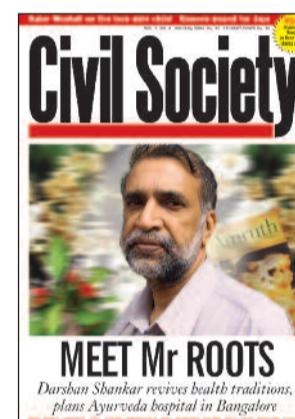
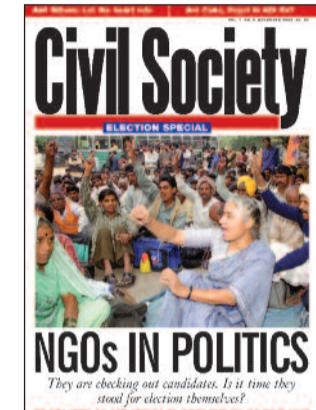
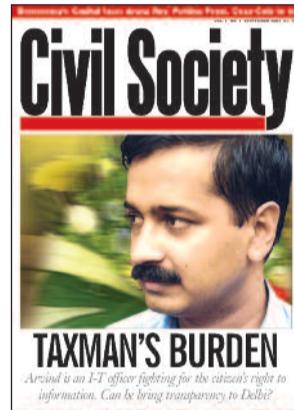
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ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

LOOKING BACK. LOOKING AHEAD

THE BEST OF CIVIL SOCIETY



ONE YEAR OLD. GROWING

BECAUSE EVERYONE IS SOMEONE

Miles to go and promises to keep

RITA & UMESH ANAND

LAST year in May, friends gave us a patient hearing when we told them that we planned to go independent and launch a magazine. Journalists in midlife tend to talk about such things, particularly after a drink or two. It is regarded as the duty of good friends to listen and ply you with more liquor so that you can sleep off your fantasies and return next morning to sensible moorings at your steady job.

But by August, when it became clear that we were quite serious, the patience gave way to genuine concern. The general opinion in our close circle was that we would starve. A magazine on NGOs and change leaders was seen as a good idea. But businesses, we were repeatedly told, don't thrive on editorial adventurism. We would need staff. Content would cost lots of money. Who would do the marketing? Why on earth would anyone advertise in such a magazine? Looked at from any end, the numbers just did not add up. To make matters worse, we hadn't done a business plan. How amateur! "Don't break your back over it," said one senior colleague grimly as we parted at his front door one night.

With this advice to haunt us, and a strange faith in our idea, we cobbled together the first issue of *Civil Society* from a single PC in our study in Gurgaon. Dummy in hand we went in search of some life-sustaining advertising. Old visiting cards were fished out and we scored a hit at our first port of call. Pranav Roach of Hughes Network Systems liked what we had done. "It is an idea whose time has come," he said with a perspicacity you won't easily find in Indian corporate circles. Hughes would advertise and give us a leg up. This was fantastic news for us and we couldn't believe our luck. Later Vijay Mishra at TCNS Clothing chipped in as well. And Promod Kapoor of Roli Books gave us a little something for our review page. Self-effacing Sanjay Labroo of Asahi Glass was very generous. We drew on Gautam Thapar, not for his wealth, but his affection and large-heartedness and robust encouragement in dark moments. So also Anupam Mishra of the Gandhi Peace Foundation and TN Ninan. From Shekhar Singh we got *jalebis* and a cheque of Rs 5001. Shankar Ghosh canvassed for us.

Our first issue in September 2003 came out with Arvind Kejriwal and Parivartan's campaign for the right to information on the cover. Aruna Roy did the Essay for our back page: it was a fine piece on how democracy has to work first in Delhi for it to thrive in less fortunate parts of the country. The response to the first issue was truly flattering and way beyond our expectations. We had produced a four-colour glossy on the social sector when all such editorial efforts in the past had been dull, drab jholawallah efforts.

We had also decided to bring out *Civil Society* as journalists, not activists. We had no baggage and in our mandate was the freedom to criticise NGOs as much as to look upon their work with sympathy and understanding. We had opted to focus on people rather than immerse ourselves in complex issues. So it was that we told the story of Arvind Kejriwal, the income-tax officer on sabbatical, and through his work showed how a right to information law is essential. We similarly profiled Indraani Singh, India's first woman Airbus pilot, and her school for underprivileged children.

With a respectable first issue to our name you would imagine things would have gotten easier. Completely wrong. The man at the magazine stall in Khan Market summed up the reality of our situation: "So many magazines like yours are produced and die out after a couple of issues." And a friend at the helm of a well-established editorial operation sent a chill down our spines: "Do you really believe that you can do this month after month with your kind of resources. You are crazy."

The second issue thus became some kind of challenge. And we can tell you now that it almost never came out.

We decided to put Sheila Dikshit on the cover. She was



A Tibetan visitor at our stall at the World Social Forum

kind enough to meet us over breakfast. We had Mode do an opinion poll on her prospects in the coming Assembly elections and we were the first to predict that she would win handsomely. But even as the issue rolled off the press at Okhla, we discovered that the cover picture had been scanned wrong. The picture itself, though an excellent frame, was not strong enough to withstand blowing up. For a magazine that takes so much pride in its looks and pictures, we had bungled terribly. We had 2,000 botched up copies of our second issue with the chief minister of Delhi on the cover looking like she was suffering from measles. We could not dare put out the issue. It was a lonely moment and our first real taste of the dangers of entrepreneurship. We decided to get a new picture of Sheila Ji and print the cover again and with that decision acquired a new confidence in ourselves.

Thereafter, there was no looking back. Our covers on NGOs in Politics, Youth4Peace and Darshan Shankar were hugely popular. RA Mashelkar decided to throw his considerable weight behind us. He wrote off letters to 25 CEOs asking them to read *Civil Society* and vouching for our credentials. We began reaching out and making new friends. A stall we set up at an NRI meeting at the Habitat Centre in Delhi brought us into contact with Robin Thomson and Ram Gidoomal. They became supporters of our venture in Britain and Ram, despite his crazy schedules, actually finds the time to do an excellent column for us.

We went off to Mumbai for the World Social Forum (WSF) and opened a stall there. Our young and enthusiastic friend Aasthi accompanied us and together we ran the stall and worked on an extensive cover story, perhaps the only detailed reportage on the WSF in the Indian media. The WSF was an amazing place to be. We got a chance to show our magazine to people from all over India and the world. It was a great opportunity and we did not let a moment pass us by. We were constantly surprised by the visitors to our stall -- such as Tony Singh of MaxLife, who rolled up beard unkempt, a cheap plastic bag swinging in his hand. Tony plonked himself on a dusty chair and watched us do our selling. Something he said has stayed with us: "In today's India, if you run a business honestly, it may be tough for a year or two, but

you will succeed."

What is your target audience is a question often asked of us. Well, our magazine was launched on the premise that there are thousands of NGOs and a growing number of people's movements in the country. They impact society in a variety of ways. It is important that their stories be told so that people understand them better and they are put through some objective scrutiny. To this extent our target audience would primarily be the activists themselves. But as it turns out subscribers are evenly spread over corporate houses, lawyers, doctors, teachers, schools, colleges. This is the picture which has emerged. But in each of these categories, the reader is quite definitely the concerned individual who wants information she can trust on a changing India. We are very proud indeed to have a subscriber in Pakistan, two in Bangladesh and perhaps 100 now in Britain. No less important is the subscriber we have in Belgaum and the one we have in Nadia district. There is a teacher of sociology who buys the magazine in the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). You will find a copy at Herbs for Health in Arunachal Pradesh.

When we set out on our own, we took a considered decision to function as a business and not an NGO. Our intention is to earn money without compromising the quality of information that we provide. As a business, we will be around as long as we fulfil a real need. On the other hand, as a fully funded NGO we could go on publishing without facing up to the realities of the marketplace.

But even as a business, we remain committed to being neutral editorial space open to people across all sections of society. We will continue to give a voice to the disenfranchised and the poor and serve as an instrument for building a modern, equitable and efficient India. We have an ethical advertising policy and will not recommend in our pages products which are detrimental to consumers.

Finally, we will use our editorial talents and skills to help small NGOs and other social initiatives build capacity in the area of communications.

This is a demanding agenda for a new business and as we enter our second year of publication we realise there are miles to go and promises to keep. But first a quick vacation.

The alternative press

T N NINAN

THE Registrar of Newspapers of India (RNI) puts out, with the delay that one has come to expect from government bodies, an annual set of figures. Among other things, these give the number of newspapers published in the country. The precise figure is unimportant, because it runs into a few tens of thousands. This would pose a mystery to most people, because they can see that in every language, there are only three or four newspapers that matter. The number in English and Hindi is slightly larger, but in both cases it is less than 10. This everyday reality is borne out by trade bodies, because the overwhelming majority of the tens of thousands of newspapers that apparently get published never figure in the bi-annual reports of the Audit Bureau of Circulations, the industry body that does an independent audit (for the benefit of advertisers) of which newspaper sells how many copies. The last ABC report listed barely a hundred daily newspapers in all languages combined, only about half as many weeklies, and another 50 fortnightly and monthly publications. That total of 200 or thereabouts is in sharp contrast to the tens of thousands reported by the RNI.

The mystery is easily solved. Most of the country's publications — whose publishers have to produce themselves before a magistrate under an old colonial law that sought to control the press — have to register with the RNI. There are two rackets that have flourished and encouraged the proliferation of publications. One was the scarcity of newsprint, controlled by a government that sought to hoard scarce foreign exchange by canalising all imports through the State Trading Corporation (which, being a government body that didn't care for the reader, bought poor quality newsprint at exorbitant prices, and passed it on to hapless publishers with a service charge added on as insult to injury). Newspapers got their entitlement of newsprint quotas on the basis of the circulation they reported to the RNI.

You can guess the end result: there was a shortage, a black market resulted, many publishers inflated their circulation numbers wildly and hawked the surplus newsprint they got as a result to cash in on black market premiums. The biggest names in India's newspaper industry played the game, as did many thousands of smaller entrepreneurs who saw the opportunity for easy money that was created by this socialist nightmare. The government didn't care, because the levers were in its control; if newspapers were too critical of the government, the STC could be asked to go slow on newsprint imports. In fact, Indira Gandhi even imposed price control on newspapers at the height of her socialist madness, stipulating what they should cost according to the number of pages they printed — and all the country's newspapers would have been in trouble if the Supreme Court had not come to their rescue.

P.Chidambaran put an end to the racket when he became finance minister in the mid-1990s, and freed the import of newsprint. But another racket continues to flourish: government advertising. At the Centre, this is channelled through the directorate of audio-visual publicity (DAVP), and in the states through variations of the directorate of information. District administrations have budgets too, as do public sector enterprises. These bodies have their own rules for deciding who should get how much advertising, and at what rates. There is one rule that favours ads being given to small and medium newspapers (shades of the old socialism); another that says any old accountant's certificate on a newspaper's circula-

tion will be accepted. You do not need an ABC certificate. Once again, you can predict the result: all manner of titles, that no one has heard of, get published allegedly, and produce certificates on their circulation, so that they can get government advertising. One conscientious head of the DAVP tried to clean up this unholy mess a few years ago, and was immediately hauled up by the then minister for information and broadcasting. The racket continues, and the RNI continues to report that many thousands of newspapers get published.

At the other end of the spectrum, you have the large newspaper titles that increasingly treat their readers as consumers and not as citizens, and in whose offices the balance between the journalists and the marketing guys has swung decisively in favour of the latter. So their circulation has grown rapidly, and because the products have been dumbed down to get those higher numbers, their influence has actually declined. How can you take a

any more (there are probably two honourable exceptions). Many don't even give you half-way decent coverage of what goes on within the country, beyond the metros. But you can read Paul Krugman on the Net as he excoriates George W Bush; you can read critiques on the media, on sites dedicated to that goal; or track the Pakistani papers to see how they see the Kashmir dispute.

Then there is a third answer: public-spirited publications with a sense of mission. The alternative press, if you will. Like the well-established and very respected but always financially constrained *Economic and Political Weekly*, which typifies the genre by being 'in' with and for its readers while maintaining the tone of an outsider when it comes to issues and governments; like *Down to Earth*, the science and environment magazine founded by the late Anil Agarwal, which has campaigned successfully on everything from Delhi's air pollution to pesticide poisoning, and which gives you a different take when it comes to

international negotiations on everything from green gases to trade; like *Seminar*, the 40-year-old title that explores in depth just one subject every month — and which chose to shut down during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rather than subject itself to her censorship; like the little magazine on Tibet that tries with its small voice to tell you what the Chinese will not; and like *Civil Society*, which is dedicated to reporting on India's growing NGO movement (for want of a better term).

All of them share some common characteristics. They are usually short of money, unless they have benefactors of one kind or another. They carve a niche for themselves only when they match the professionalism and subject expertise of much bigger publications. They manage every once in a while to set the agenda, which the big titles and TV networks then magnify after it becomes obvious that a chord has been (or can be) struck with the public. Almost always, they are

richer in their journalistic talent than in business expertise. To their credit, though they are usually the brainchild of one restless soul, many of them become sufficiently institutionalised to be able to survive and continue the mission, even when the founder is no longer around. And finally, rarely do they sell more than 10,000 copies of an issue. That is less than a half of one per cent of what the Times of India sells every day.

You would think, therefore, that they don't matter. But India is richer for them. Their readers are amazingly loyal. People in the small towns and in far-flung areas, desperate for some real information about what is going on, reach for these titles much more than harried consumers in the metros, who can barely manage to stay awake in front of the TV set at the end of a long commuter's day. College students in the mofussil towns use them as resource material for project reports. The more intelligent and concerned politicians even read them for ideas, and to bone up on issues.

India prides itself, rightly, on its free press. But the story of India's press is not just its big titles that figure in the ABC lists: giants without the wit to realize their true power and the good to which it can be turned. The richness, depth and variety that we see and get, is also the result of people who usually have not found their space in the mainstream media but who continue to be moved by issues, and who want to address readers as citizens. They are very few, among the tens of thousands of titles that figure in the RNI's annual list. But they make a difference. And so, on the first anniversary of *Civil Society*, a small toast to India's alternative press.

(T N Ninan is the editor of Business Standard)



publication seriously when you know that its news columns are available for sale to whoever is willing to pay? So you scan the headlines, look at the classified and 'for sale' columns, stop at the pictures of the beautiful people, and get on with your day.

It's a situation that cries out for something different. And, as always, the market is evolving. At one level, you have the honest-to-goodness trade journals that cater to special interests: motoring magazines that you turn to when you want to decide on which car to buy, photography and computer journals for when you want to pick up a camera or a desk-top, personal finance/investment magazines that advise you on how to manage your money, design magazines that give you ideas on how to design your bedroom, and so on. Watch the magazine racks in any busy market and the proliferation of titles tells its story. These are not titles that need either newsprint (they are printed on glossy paper) or government advertising. So they don't show up on some media planner's screen, but they exist all right.

But this genre too treats the reader as consumer. Where does the citizen turn? One answer is that media multiplicity helps. You don't take one newspaper, you take two or three or four. And between them, you hope you've got all the news that matters, the different angles to a story, and countervailing biases. It helps that newspapers have become steadily cheaper as a result of the circulation wars, so your budget doesn't go out of whack because half a kilogramme of colourful newsprint lands on your front door every morning.

A second answer is the internet. Almost no Indian newspaper cares to give you proper international coverage

A hitchhiker's guide to the media super highway

ASHOK KHOSLA

EVER since I was a little child, I have been completely fascinated by the power of the media. In those early days, all I knew of the media was the traditional kinds of newspapers and the rudimentary form of radio that existed around the time our nation gained independence – but clearly even then they were influential enough to determine a very large part of what people knew and thought about the world around them. For most of the people I knew, they were the founts of all information, knowledge and wisdom. The mentoring functions that had in times past been served by the parent, the guru, the community elder and the priest were, in the latter half of the twentieth century, being rapidly taken over by the ubiquitous media.

In its role as a guardian of the public good and as an instrument of change, the media seemed to me also to have the duty of exercising this extraordinary power with extraordinary responsibility. Gradually, with the passing of the years, I have sadly come to realise that this is not the case. The motivation for much of the media world to ply its trade today is largely just that: to ply its trade for commercial gains, even if this means that its responsibilities as a guardian of social values have to be sacrificed. Barring only a few exceptions, today's newspapers, magazines and television channels have gone this route. What sells and brings in readership and audience has become the sole justification for their existence and operation. Newspapers in our country – some with more than 150 years of enviable journalistic traditions – have today become tabloids and rags, simply because that is how they can make more money. And they are more concerned with the ephemeral "news" of who is doing what to whom – mostly in the interchangeable fields of politics, entertainment and sports – rather than acting as a channel for communicating genuine knowledge that has more lasting worth.

CARRY A GOOD MAP: And this is happening precisely at the moment in history when there is the greatest ever need for radical change in the direction that civilization is taking. Fully one half of the people in our country barely survive or subsist on the margins of the monetised economy. At the same time, the soils, water and biological resources that provide the basis of existence itself are rapidly degrading or disappearing. And each year the gap between what the people need and the capacity of these resources to meet these needs widens.

Who is to blame? And who can help bring about the change we need?

Well, in one sense, the answer to both questions is ... everybody. But some have greater responsibility than others, both for where we are and for bringing about the changes that can take us where we must go.

It is the "mentors" of society to whom we must turn as one of the prime causes and also the potential carriers of the solutions to many of our social, environmental and economic ills. It is these mentors in whom society – at considerable expense – has invested its resources and hopes. And it is the mentors whom it has charged with the responsibility of delivering knowledge in its wider interest and with the power to be a watchdog and ensure that those whose job is to deliver, do. The newspapers,

the radio stations, the TV Channels and all the other media which serve as our windows to the world.

And, unfortunately, it is the mentors who have often let down, and indeed betrayed, the expectations of society.

In some cases, this has been because of lack of information on the specific, contextual issues on which they report. In other cases, it has resulted from lack of knowledge or "science" regarding the processes and systems that need to be designed. And much of the time, it has been the result of a lack of wisdom – in turn partly because of narrow perspectives engendered by specialised training and partly because of varying degrees of greed and graft.

DON'T STUFF THE RUCKSACK: Lack of information can no longer be much of an excuse. Published and unpub-

the basis of this journal, aptly titled *Civil Society*.

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: It is the community based organisations who work with real life people, whether in the village or in the city slums, that come to know the complexity of the lives of the real people of our country: the poor and the marginalized somehow surviving in an economy neither of their making nor for their benefit. And the futility of the misplaced trust in monodimensional solutions. And from such experiences we must learn - quickly. The main key, if there is one, is to build the capacity of communities to identify, formulate and solve their own problems. For this, they must have institutional mechanisms that allow solid participation by every citizen in local decision making. And, to make such participation meaningful, they must have access to information on a variety of things, including their rights, their resources and the technologies they can use to set up their livelihoods on a sustainable basis.

Local communities have a basic need to generate locally appropriate knowledge, and to communicate new insights internally, and to wider audiences. There is a demonstrated value in using the tools of electronic communication and the Internet, print and broadcast media in specific development initiatives and projects, in health, agriculture, environmental protection and wealth creation. The stories and experiences should be shared with others in their region,

and beyond, demonstrating how positive change happens in real-life situations. In addition, development solutions are intricately bound up with culture and its diversity. We know that cultural diversity is akin to and as important as bio-diversity. Cultures and societies whose perspectives are marginalized in a globalizing world can react in an aberrant fashion, as we now realize.

TAKE ALONG SOMETHING GOOD TO READ: The fundamental need in any third world country such as India is to create large numbers of sustainable livelihoods. The primary thrust of the media must be to do what it can to help make this happen, in a manner that it fits into the values of the South, rather than those of the North.

What is now needed is to turn from that greed and graft back to creed and craft by renewing the pledge that a professional makes to society when graduating from training into professional practice. Indeed, a Hippocratic Oath equivalent is now needed for media professionals that includes a professional commitment to the highest levels of integrity, excellence and relevance. To set in place a well-designed professional system will require a high degree of vigilance by peers – individuals and organisations – to ensure that development professionals bring to their work the highest possible level of integrity, excellence and relevance.

For this effort, the role of civil society that includes not only the voluntary organisations and NGOs of today but also new kinds of organisations of tomorrow, such as social enterprises capable of combining public goals with private motivation, becomes doubly important. It is to enable them to share their experience, knowledge and wisdom that this journal, *Civil Society*, is so important.

(Ashok Khosla heads Development Alternatives)

For those who wish to learn and share their knowledge of how to make the lives of all our citizens better, neither the mainstream media nor the specialised journals service their full needs. What they need is a general purpose vehicle that focuses on specific sectoral issues. This is, of course the basis of *Civil Society*.

lished information is now available to anyone who wishes to access it on virtually any subject through not only through the electronic media, including computer-based data exchange, but still, much more pervasively, through the printed literature. The danger is no longer too little information, but too much.

In fact, it is information overload that now seriously threatens our ability to make rational – i.e., well-informed, meaningful – decisions. Information Overload and Information Underuse As the quantity of information coming at us rises, and these days it rises exponentially, the general background noise is inexorably swamping out the signals we need to pick up to design a more sustainable future.

It is not the information technology revolution that is the cause of this overload. It is, rather, the common and widespread desire to publish and broadcast everything, no matter how trivial or irrelevant it might be to others, partly in the hope that it will bring in customers.

And sharing of knowledge is not a bad thing. For the development community, it is a fundamental need to learn from others and actively to share the information we generate, driven not so much by generosity as by self-interest. After all, with love, knowledge is one of the few things in the world that is negentropic: the more you give, the more you get. Everything else in the universe, as shown by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, is running down.

For those who wish to learn and share their knowledge of how to make the lives of all our citizens better, neither the mainstream, general-purpose media nor the specialised professional journals currently service their full needs. What they need is a general purpose vehicle that focuses on specific sectoral issues. This is, of course



PILOT FOR A SCHOOL

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

Civil Society News

Gurgaon, Haryana

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

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

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

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

catch attention like AIDS or the problems of the handicapped and donors tend to shy away," she says. "The government has the infrastructure and reach but lacks the will to act, so education for the masses remains grounded."

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

This is where Captain Singh comes in with her NGO, offering quality education for those who would normally be deprived of it. Local village children and those of migrants are her clients. The school fees are Rs 5 per month. Children are provided transport, food,

clean clothes and healthcare. A computer learning centre has been started with help from NIIT. The education programmes are tailored for children.

Pathshala, the first programme Captain Singh introduced, imparts education for two hours in the evening. Children studying in regular schools can get free tuition in Maths, English, Commerce. First-time learners are taught the basics and become familiar with the school

system. The Vidyapeeth programme functions every morning. Children are taught upto Class V and helped to join formal schools. For those who make it to the formal school, the Gurukul programme is a scholarship which covers the cost of uniforms, books and transport.

The Karigari programme targets children over 16 years of age who are dropouts. They are taught motor mechanics, driving, plumbing and electrical work. Captain Singh is dis-

satisfied with the program. Literacy India provides the student a stipend of Rs 500 per month but this is insufficient, she says. A child can pick up these skills and more money by becoming an apprentice with an experienced person., she points out. A few youngsters trained in software design found jobs, and Singh is examining newer employment options in the hotel industry and the apparel sector.

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

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

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

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

The shoddy education provided by government schools is a major issue in all villages. Captain Singh has made valiant attempts to work with them. Children from Literacy India join these schools and her teachers monitor their performance. She offered to upgrade the government

school in Chauma. "The principal told me to first close down my school," she recalls. The few schools who do respond, like the one in Samalkha, have good principals battling indifferent staff. The rest are hostile.

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



A PANCHAYAT FOR HOMELESS

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

Civil Society News

New Delhi

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

The idea of a panchayat came from the first Mahapanchayat of the homeless held on February 23, 2003, by Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA) a project of Action Aid. More than 623 homeless drew up a memorandum demanding 100 permanent shelters, permission for street vending, facilities for banking, identity cards, ration cards and separate shelters for women, the mentally ill and handicapped. It was decided that a panchayat should be convened, once a month, so that the homeless could discuss their problems.

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

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

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



could always create space.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AAA goes national

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Snakeman is saviour

But all he gets is venom from the govt.

Rathi Menon
Chandigarh

T was 3 am. Bleary eyed, I watched Captain Suresh Sharma manoeuvre his way into a tiny bathroom. Some time later, he emerged, a writhing bag in his hand. Inside was a common krait that had driven the household hysterical. The lady of the house shed tears of gratitude. "You asked me what I get from this work. This is my reward," said Sharma, as we left.

A typical call for the Snake Cell in Chandigarh.

"People have all sorts of fears about snakes, fuelled no doubt, by the mindless serials and films they watch," grumbled Sharma in the car. He has rescued 625 snakes, among them venomous common kraits and Russell's vipers.

By saving snakes from people Sharma conveys the greater message of nature conservation. That is why he and his wife, Rajbir, founded the Snake Cell on June 5, 1997, World Environment Day. Chandigarh provides fertile ground for his efforts as it is surrounded by a dense forest.

The city is familiar with his

Tempo Traveller with its King Cobra logo. Curious passers-by stop him at petrol pumps and even on the road. "People think I collect snakes for anti-venom preparations. When I say I release them in the jungle, they ask, 'Isme aapko kya milta hai? (What do you get out of this?)' I tell them, 'You pray to the gods and spend money on pujas. What do you get out of it? This is my puja to nature.' Then they nod in agreement."

Another FAQ is, has Sharma ever been bitten by a snake? "I tell them, no, because I respect snakes and handle them very carefully."

Every newspaper in Chandigarh carries Sharma's Snake Cell phone number and the Police Control Room is always in touch. Calls for help come early morning or late at night and peak during the monsoon.

After Sharma stages a rescue operation, he educates the family and its neighbours about snakes. "It's a good moment; if I stand on a street and start lecturing, nobody will listen. At times, I even use the snake I've caught, but only if it's non-venomous."

Not many schools invite him to educate their students.

though he's willing to do it for free. Those who do, find children handle the reptiles fearlessly. "Ninety per cent have no fear and 98 per cent handle

snakes as if born to it. With adults, it's another story."

He believes if children become sensitive to nature, conservation will thrive. "You can't



talk to them about the polar bear or the chiru—they are not familiar with them. But you can show them the life around and how that life is affected by human activity. People think it is the job of the government and NGOs or wildlife activists, but what I stress is that everybody can and should do it."

What about money? "The Snake Cell is a totally self-financed project. Till date I have not received any grant or help from the government or the UT administration here."

Ironically, administrative policies actually compelled him to close his souvenir shop at the Sukhna Lake, a tourist hot spot in Chandigarh. Sharma sold his special Ecosense brand of souvenirs—T-shirts, key chains and door knockers. Each item told the story of an endangered species such as turtles, leopards and black bucks. The Snake Cell was financed from this money.

"Chandigarh Industrial and Tourism Development Corporation (CITCO) kept raising the rent and when it got to Rs 15,000 a month, I had to close shop." Obviously, officialdom could not see the difference between a venture for a good cause and an ordinary commercial enterprise.

Since then, Sharma has been negotiating with some national parks to sell his products there, "but they behave like a Lala in Chandni Chowk". He raises some money by taking tourists on wildlife tours, though he stays away from group tours.

Initially Sharma used crude equipment he had designed himself, but now he has professionally designed hooks, tongs, torches, bags and first-aid kit, given to him by an American benefactress, Mary Barber. In return, Sharma took the 73-year-old Barber on a trip of India's wilds. "She shed tears of joy when I showed her a tigress and her cubs in the Kanha National Park. It was her first experience of this gentle animal," recalls Sharma.

A few wildlife enthusiasts are helping him start village level workshops, set up a snake park in Chandigarh and film wildlife. "We have formed a group of people who share our passion. If you run after money, conditions will be imposed on you, but if you run after your passion, you can function as free birds."

The Bhakra Beas Management Board wants Sharma to educate their workforce. He is upbeat about the offer. "But first, I asked the organisers to conduct an anti-venom allergy test on their personnel. What is the use of teaching someone who is allergic, to handle snakes?"

Sharma's "mission impossible"? Only Chandigarh's bureaucratic set-up can answer that one.

(Contact Captain Suresh Sharma at www.snakecell.org)

NGO with grit defeats Heinz,

From a dusty office in Pitampura BPNI fought cases,

Rita Anand
New Delhi

HE Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) looks like a humdrum NGO working out of a cramped office in dusty North Delhi. It employs a handful of people and is headed by an earnest doctor. In May 2003, the NGO won a major victory in its long-drawn battle against baby food manufacturers. BPNI got the Union government to amend the Infant Milk Substitutes Act of 1993 and ban advertisements and promotions of baby food for children below the age of two. The ban went into effect from November 1, 2003.

This was a defining moment for BPNI. But the news barely found mention. Over the years, the breastfeeding cause has lost its lustre. Feminists shrug indifferently. The jholawallas look bored.

But Civil Society was intrigued. How did BPNI get laws changed without campaigns, slogans, celebrities, dharnas? Arrayed against them were multinationals like Nestle, Wockhardt and Heinz. There was also India's dairy cooperative, Amul. How did they do it?

Dr Arun Gupta, BPNI's national coordinator says there was no single strategy. "We simply adjusted our plans as we went along." This meant relentless advocacy with MPs and the bureaucracy for over eight years. Every stage of the campaign needed new guerrilla tactics.

Early days The history of the battle against the feeding bottle dates back to the 1970s. Several case studies documented the deleterious effect infant foods and milk substitutes were having on the health of infants in developing countries. Multinationals promoted these through aggressive advertising and marketing.

Seduced by pictures of chubby babies, mothers opted for packaged products instead of breast milk. In countries where clean water was not available, the use of feeding bottles resulted in a marked rise in diarrhoeal deaths. Colostrum a rich source of antibodies in mother's milk was being denied to babies, lowering immunity. Malnutrition and the infant mortality rate recorded an increase.

The issue was hotly debated for a while and led to the adoption of an International Code for Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 1981. The Code sought to control marketing practices by manufacturers of infant foods and milk substitutes. Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made a stirring speech at WHA in support. The United States was the only nation that declined to be party to the agreement. Other member-states, including India, agreed to draw up a suitable national legal frame-



Dr Arun Gupta (third from right) and his team at their Pitampura office in New Delhi

work for implementation.

It took 11 years for that to happen.

India has the highest number of under-five child deaths in the world. Research establishes that most deaths are caused by poor nutrition. According to WHO and UNICEF, about 1.5 million babies can be saved each year by increasing breast-feeding during the first six months.

First law In 1983, the Indian government inserted a Code on Protection and Promotion of Breastfeeding including labelling rules into the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act (PFA). But comprehensive legislation had to wait.

Explaining the long gap, Dr Gupta points out the mid-eighties were a time of political instability. He says dairy giant Amul stalled attempts by the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) to get legislation through.

Finally, VHAI's Mumbai branch came up with a draft bill and won the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party's Ram Naik, Union minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas. "Naik was approached because he was perceived as being honest and sympathetic to the cause," explains Chander Uday Singh an activist lawyer who works with BPNI and the Association for Consumers Action on Safety and

Health (ACASH).

Naik agreed to introduce the draft in the Lok Sabha as an innocuous private member's bill. After three attempts the bill was picked by lottery. The ruling Congress wanted the honor of presenting it. Arjun Singh, Union minister of Human Resource Development (HRD) took responsibility. In August 1993, the Infant Milk Substitutes Act 1993 was notified and India became the tenth country in the world to pass such legislation.

An ambiguous law BPNI began

work in 1992. "We knew the IMS Act was imperfect. But we thought, at least we have a law," says Dr Gupta. The government passed on the onerous task of monitoring the IMS to ACASH in Mumbai and BPNI in Delhi.

There were ambiguities in the Act, which encouraged violations. For instance, in Section 2 (a) advertisement was defined as "any notice, circular, label, wrapper and other documents and also includes any visible representation or announcement made by any light, smoke, sound or gas."

It was therefore unclear whether it was legal to advertise infant food and milk substitutes on TV and radio.

In section 2 (d) while classifying the

health care system, drugstores and pharmacies were excluded.

Under Section 2 (f) infant food meant "...any food being marketed or otherwise represented as a complement to mother's milk to meet the growing nutritional needs of the infant after the age of four months." But the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended exclusive breastfeeding till the age of six months and introduction of baby food after six months to two years of age.

Section 3 (a) stated: "No person shall take part in the publication of any advertisement for the distribution, sale or supply of infant milk substitutes or feeding bottles." Advertising infant milk substitutes and feeding bottles was therefore banned, but infant food was not.

However in Section 3 (c) promotions of all three were prohibited... "no person shall take part in the promotion of use or sale of infant milk substitutes or feeding bottles or infant foods otherwise than in accordance with the provisions of the Act."

Every container had to carry several lengthy messages and warnings. These were to be displayed rather prominently. Pictures of babies, women or graphics were not permitted for infant milk substitutes under section 6 (2) of the Act.

Section 7 (1) stated that "educational material" circulated should include infor-

Nestle, Amul, Wockhardt...

lobbied for 9 years, got baby food advertisements stopped

mation promoting breastfeeding and "the harmful effects on breastfeeding due to the partial adoption of bottle feeding". But since "educational material" was not clearly explained advertisements were printed as pamphlets and passed off as being educational.

The Act made it illegal to provide "financial inducements" to health workers but doctors and medical researchers were left out.

A futile chase For nearly eight years BPNI and ACASH doggedly pursued multinationals, corporates, public sector undertakings and even Doordarshan as they skirted the IMS Act.

Infant food ads popped up on soap wrappers, tins of talcum powder and other unrelated products. Posters put up by Nestle "...I love you Cerelac" on streets and markets, were splashed. Worse mandatory warnings were not printed. This was illegal. BPNI sent a notice. An apology arrived. The posters were reprinted with statutory labelling requirements in fine print. Now this was against the rules, said BPNI.

Gujarat Dairy's Amul Spray container was sold with a teddy bear on its label. Feeding bottles were given as "free gifts". Indian Oil beamed a TV commercial showing its Maruti Engine Oil being poured into the engine of a car with a feeding bottle. When BPNI objected, the company's marketing director replied: "The feeding bottle used in our commercial for promoting Maruti Genuine Oil is only an analogy to portray that the most suitable nutritious food should be..."

Nearly all TV stations including Doordarshan telecast commercials. The Law ministry's advice to Doordarshan to please uphold the IMS Act was ignored.

Gupta says the insidious hold of the baby food manufacturers on the health system began to grow. Free samples of baby food were given to doctors for "testing". Nestlé's nutrition services offered international fellowships to paediatricians and sponsored meetings and seminars. Likewise Heinz's publication "In Touch" announced sponsorship for research in nutrition. Multinationals also financed seminars and workshops for paediatricians.

Court to court As early as 1994, BPNI and ACASH approached the criminal courts to pin down Nestle. That year Nestle advertised Cerelac for babies during the fourth month whereas the IMS Act section 2 (f) specifically stated infant foods could be introduced only after the fourth month.

The two NGOs hired a young lawyer for a fee of Rs 2000 and filed a complaint in the court of the Metropolitan Magistrate,

New Delhi. In 1995 the criminal court found Nestle guilty of violating the IMS Act, took cognisance of offence and summoned the company through its Managing Director.

Nestle approached the Delhi High Court and stated it was complying with PFA rules, therefore the IMS Act was not applicable to them. Chander Uday Singh, who represented ACASH, contends that a new Act supersedes an older one if the two are in conflict.

Nestle wanted the case in the lower court quashed. "But the judge did not give an injunction," says Dr Gupta. In 1998 the High Court gave directions for the criminal trial in the lower court to proceed. It came up for hearing in December 2003. Throughout, says Dr Gupta, Nestle employed a battery of lawyers to adjourn the case and frustrate BPNI and ACASH.

World opinion Meanwhile, the WHA was getting uncomfortable about the trillion-dollar food industry's role in child health. Over the years, the assembly had passed several resolutions with limited success. In 2001 a WHA resolution recommended exclusive breastfeeding for six months and complementary foods only after that.

At a meeting of the WHA in May 2002, the Indian government was most critical of baby food companies. India said since companies were driven solely by profit, it was unrealistic to expect them to promote breastfeeding. It urged careful watch on the financial support such companies offered to health professionals. Led by the Indian government, member states said no to public-private partnerships.

The WHA meet limited the role of the commercial sector to ensuring quality control and said companies had no role to play in nutrition programmes for babies or young children as it led to a "conflict of interests". WHO endorsed WHA's position.

Act local Dr Gupta says international agreements do influence national governments but finally it is local action, which works.

"Remember from the start that the government is not going to do anything. You have to prepare the bill, convince them, answer all questions and pilot it through," he says. In 1994 BPNI and ACASH had approached the government to amend the IMS Act in order to control marketing. "We are not pushing women into breastfeeding," says Dr Gupta.

With Uday Singh's help appropriate amendments were drawn up and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD) was approached. "The ministry especially the Department for Women and Child Development were very supportive," recalls Singh. The

department constituted a Task Force from various ministries and departments of the Central government and voluntary agencies. The National Commission for Women gave its inputs.

It took quite a while for some members of the Task Force to understand what BPNI was talking about. Dr Gupta explained international agreements India was party to, the importance of breastfeeding, the IMS Act, the violations taking place and the legal changes required.

The file travelled through the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies and the Law ministry. There were objections at every stage and BPNI had to defend its position. "It is crucial to know how the government works," says Dr Gupta, "you need to have legal advice at all times to answer queries". Finally in 1998 the Task Force recommended these amendments to the government.

After this the file got stuck at the HRD department. On and off BPNI would make inquiries about its progress. Frequently clarifications and questions would be sought. "Once a junior official inquired whether any precedent to such amendments existed anywhere in the world," recalls Dr Gupta. Examples were sent from Ghana and Bangladesh, countries with similar problems. "These are just small countries," Dr Gupta was told, dismissively. BPNI was convinced multinationals were behind the delay.

Still Dr Gupta befriended the deputy secretary and made a presentation to lower rung officials. "Educate everybody," he says and don't ignore the junior staff.

Personal networks In 1998, BPNI had organised a national workshop on child nutrition to sensitise the media. Former Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Sushma Swaraj was invited. "She was very supportive and endorsed our stand," says Dr Gupta.

Her personal physician Dr Ashok Dutta was a good friend of his. He advised Dr Gupta to meet her and offered to arrange it. Dr Gupta went to her home and informed her about TV channels, including Doordarshan, misusing the IMS Act. He told her that his file was stuck in Sumitra Mahajan Union HRD minister's department. Swaraj spoke to her. The next day the file finally moved to Mahajan's table. Meanwhile, BPNI got a question on the amendments raised in Parliament. The Deputy Secretary in the HRD ministry was asked to reply. In this way pressure built up on the bureaucrats and Mahajan.

The turning point came in September 2000. Swaraj banned direct or indirect promotion of infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles and infant foods through the Cable Television Network (Amendment) Act and Rules. "I received a call from Dr

Datta on that fateful day, asking me to call on her immediately," recalls Gupta. "I went immediately to her house. She was going to table the amendment. She asked me whether it was all right. I said, 'Yes.'

Dr Gupta had won half the battle. Nearly 40 million Indians watch TV. Overnight ads for baby food and infant milk substitutes were blanked out.

Right atmosphere But the

legal amendments were still stuck in the HRD department so BPNI began networking politicians. This was considerably tougher. "Nestle can get a meeting with a minister easily, but we cannot."

Mahajan agreed to organise a meeting of parliamentarians. Several MPs attended. Dr Gupta made a presentation. The MPs listened and said they would be supportive. But nothing happened.

In September 2001, BPNI went back to Ram Naik and told him emotionally about the cause they espoused and the file. Naik was leaving for Indonesia, but he was sufficiently moved. He picked up the phone and spoke to Mahajan in Marathi and fixed a meeting for BPNI the next day. This time Dr Gupta informed her about WHA and WHO resolutions to which India was party and provided her with printed proof.

In March 2002, the bill finally entered the Lok Sabha and was debated. Prior to this, BPNI activists met politicians including Pranab Mukherji and Manmohan Singh to garner support. An advocacy kit was prepared for each MP to educate them about the amendments. The HRD ministry suggested a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) examine the bill. This was a dangerous stage. "It was essential to keep the heat on, otherwise the bill may have been put on the backburner," says Chander Uday Singh.

The sessions of the JPC were not placid. Chander recalls sitting around a table while some 18 MPs asked questions. Many MPs were openly hostile. "Even if people are unsympathetic, just soldier on," says Dr Gupta. Fortunately Arjun Singh was the chairperson. Dr Gupta went to his home and briefed him.

The JPC passed the bill in December 2002.

"Once a bill is okayed, it is better not to tamper with it, otherwise the process will start all over again," cautions Dr Gupta. The December 13 attack on Parliament stalled its safe passage once again. BPNI worked overtime to keep interest in the bill alive. In May 2003 the bill was passed in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. In June, came the President's assent.

But the baby food companies did have one last victory: they managed to delay its implementation till November 2003.

It took nine years for the amendments to happen.

Theatre can be therapy

Zulfi shows how with shoeshine boys and prison inmates

Rathi Menon
Chandigarh

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

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

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

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

Till they met him, they spent their free time either selling movie tickets in the black or quarrelling in the streets. But the first play that Theatre Age staged way back in 19'93 changed everything, even for Zulfi. Then slowly boys began to flock to him and, to his shock, Zulfi found 90% were hooked on drugs. The leader of that group is now Zulfi's right hand man.

Ajay Rana, a tall strapping young man, is the success story of Zulfi's unique drug de-addiction programme, that of weaning them away from the 'nasha' of drugs and introducing them to the 'nasha' of 'taliyan'. Recognition plays a big role in providing self-esteem and sense of purpose.

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



Zulfi's shoeshine boys and other children

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Besides making them aware of the better side of life, Zulfi managed to get clearance from the Administrator, Justice (Retd) OP Verma, for setting up an Entertainment Club in the jail. For all the sweating out with hardcore criminals for more than two weeks, this was the only remuneration. "We said in the play that religion makes good human beings out of you. I stress that theatre has the same purpose."



The cast of prisoners after the performance at Burail Model Jail

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

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

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

Zulfi's brand of theatre has always

RAIN SAVED IS RENT IN THE BANK

Civil Society News

New Delhi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ML Sood, a former chief engineer irrigation, then a sprightly 95-year-old, suggested rain water-harvesting. The Managing Committee liked the idea and scouted around for details. They approached the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) and the DJB who showed them designs of cement and concrete. The committee members sadly shook their heads. Too ugly and too costly. Then they visited Vasant Vihar's rainwater harvesting project, but found it unsuitable. GD Saigal, 80 years old, proposed a borewell which could filter the water and recharge the aquifer. This idea found favour.

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

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

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

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Krishan Sehgal at the Panchshila Club

And you can do it yourself

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Is pressure harvesting better?

Civil Society News

New Delhi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

School with a clear conscience

Rathi A Menon
Panchkula

ELEVEN bubbly children, neatly attired in school uniform, conversed eagerly in English, a language they have recently learnt. They come from poor homes and study at the DC Model Senior Secondary School in Sector 7 of Panchkula. The school, voluntarily and quietly, admits children from low-income groups.

"Our aim is to save the intelligence in our country. We can't remove poverty single-handedly. Our missive to schools in all districts of Haryana is-- if the child is intelligent and money is a problem, please send the child to us," says Bharat B Gupta, the school's principal.

While elite schools in Delhi quibble over the Delhi government's order to reserve seats for poor children, the DC Model School has adopted them without a fuss. The children are wining laurels in various competitions. One academic session has ended and they came through with flying colours.

"I stand first in my class. I got 89%" says Kavita, a student of Class 8. Saurabh and Sumit chip in. "Our results and rank have improved after coming here. Earlier we used to be in the 11th or 12th position but now we come third or fourth."

Kavita is a national certificate holder in yoga. Kamlesh and Sunil are state-level taekwondo champions while Arun and Saurabh are in the state yoga team. But the best success story is Poonam's. "Since there was not much of that different species feeling towards us, we could do what we always wanted to do. Earlier we used to watch the other children doing. Now we do." This achievement is reflected in the home.

"Now we can teach our brothers and sisters," say Julie and Tushar.

Gupta points out the school adopted a systematic approach. A letter was sent to all government schools in Panchkula saying that the DC Model School intended to adopt children from the poorest sections of society and that there would be a test. Children who passed would be admitted to the school, free of cost.

Out of 135 students who appeared for the test, only 17 were found eligible. They were given uniforms and books and provided a nutritious diet during school hours. They were put together in a separate section. "It was done to guard the children from developing any complex and to enhance their learning capacity. Initially, all subjects were taught in Hindi. Then we began to switch over slowly to English, one subject at a time," says Gupta.

The children are no longer in a separate section. "This was an experiment," Gupta remarks. ``Now we know what should be done and how to go about it." And when the school opens a new branch near Pinjore, they will admit poorer children from the start. "That school has



Bharat B Gupta, principal of DC Model School (centre) with students

boarding facilities. If such a child is taken care of from the nursery stage, then his or her growth will be the same as the other children," says Gupta

According to him there are two more schools admitting children from poorer homes.

"They have class restrictions," he says. "The Little Flower School is only up to Class 8. Students who score more than 70% are admitted here." There is also a Gurukool, but it is till Class 5. After that, the children are admitted to the DC Model School. "Since the Gurukool had taken these children from a very young age, they are now up to the mark," says Gupta.

Gupta discussed the school's policy of admitting poorer children with the parents of wealthier students. "I asked them, do you want to make your child great or good?" he says. A play was staged on the same theme. "After that we organized food for the children in slums. The girls cooked and the boys distributed it. That changed the richer children's attitude. They realised the advantages they had. This was a character-building exercise, for our motto is 'education in human values'. When the children became willing supporters, the parents also

approved," says Gupta.

The only problem was how to make the children do their home work since nobody at home would be able to help. Kiran Kaushal, volunteered. She provided the children with cycles so that they could go to her for their home work. Kiran has become more than a tutor. "She loves us like her own children," says Sumit. For Gupta, she is an excellent go between. "She knows their innermost feelings. So if anything goes wrong, we know how to rectify it," says Gupta.

It's hard to find a difference between the poorer children and their richer classmates.

As one parent remarked after a yoga drill. "I did not know they were from slums. They looked so confident and well-groomed like my daughter or your son." Though the children have shed their inhibitions, their parents find it difficult to come for parent-teacher meetings. But Gupta has this to say. "From our side we want them to tell us what more we can do. For we feel they have obliged us by giving us a chance. School is, of course, a business but we have tried to put a little conscience into it."

Contact the school at 0172-3096458,
0172-2597545/2596464.

“Just received the May issue of Civil Society. It is excellent three previous issues. The series on poll reforms is illuminating.

-S. Mundayoor, Herbs for Better Health,

THE MAGAZINE EVERYONE LIKES

Turban, kirpan, some earthworms

Rathi A Menon

Anandpur Sahib

MICHEL Rudel was born in southern France, a region where grapes and almonds grew aplenty. He followed his soul to village Nupur Bedi, near Anandpur Sahib, the spiritual heart of Sikhism, to become Darshan Singh, a Sikh and an organic farmer. His 12-acre farm equipped with gobar gas, revives memories of the homespun farmer, lost in the frenetic days of the Green Revolution.

"If you run after quick results, you are sure to suffer side effects. The fertile soil of Punjab is withering away. Why? Because high-yielding varieties of seeds are being overused. The soil does not get rest. These seeds need lots of fertiliser and water. So the water table goes down," explains Darshan, stroking his salt and pepper beard. Pointing to grains of wheat spread out to dry, he says, "When we started, the initial yield of wheat used to be hardly 25 quintals. Now I get 45 quintals and our wheat is overbooked. Organic farming is like homeopathy, giving you results slowly but with an everlasting effect."

Darshan always stood out from the crowd. Even as a child he was a strict vegetarian. Later he showed a penchant for long hair and a beard. As he grew into adulthood, he frequently asked why he could not sport hair like Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed. His searching question led to clashes with the local priest. What irritated him the most, he says, were the differences between various groups practising Christianity. The orthodoxy of the church made him an atheist and a wanderer.

But a visit to India in 1976-77 changed his outlook. He got attracted to Sikhism. "I felt I received answers to all my questions from Sikhism. My faith in religion was restored." So on his second visit, this time to Mumbai in 1980, he bought a turban. He was baptised at Anandpur Sahib in 1991.

He then reflected on what he wanted to do. "I had some good friends, who were doing organic farming in Europe and I went to stay with them. That became my school. When I found that trees and plants, which got natural manure, were becoming immune to pests and yielding delicious fruit, I realised the value of organic farming." Since he had decided to farm in India, he saved money by doing odd jobs. He was a landscape gardener in Japan and a teacher in a London school.



Darshan Singh at his farm

CAPT. SURESH SHARMA

impression was, this foreign sardarji will not be able to farm without fertilisers. But Darshan was determined. "The advantage is this light soil. Heavy soil retains fertilisers and pesticides for long. But light soil washes it off."

Darshan uses farmyard manure and green leaf manure to enrich soil. Household waste is directed into the fields through underground pipes. Amazingly, there are no flies. "When you do it in layers, flies don't breed and hence there is no threat of diseases." Pink earthworms are hard at work in the manure shed. "The manure they churn out is very smooth," says Darshan.

"In Punjab, people burn the waste from the wheat harvest, destroying all the natural nutrients. No wonder all the earthworms have disappeared. Here I put the waste at the foot of plants. After the rains, the waste becomes manure. I do the same with soya bean waste."

An important problem is tackling weeds. "They are very deep-rooted and suck all nutrients. Crop rotation is the only way to keep all these irritants out." Peanuts, rice, potato, moong dal and sugarcane are some of the crops cultivated. "We became famous for our high-quality gur," says Darshan. Sugarcane, he explains, brings a lot of organic matter into the soil. He raises saplings from traditional seeds. "Where do we get desi varieties of seeds nowadays? High time we started protecting the traditional varieties."

High profile crusaders have let him down. A Dehra Dun-based organisation, led by a diva of organic farming and traditional wisdom, dilly-dallied over sending him seeds.

"After some time, I gave up on them," says Darshan. simply. The government too has been lackadaisical.

"If a few of us, who have lots of fruit trees, get together and the government sets up a processing plant, then our produce can be processed and sold," he says. Most of Darshan's produce has been sold by word of mouth.

"A sardar here, who had been told to eat organic food by his doctor after a severe heart attack, is our regular customer and marketing man. He has been putting up posters in stores and spreading information about us."

Anyone who has tasted the brown rice, wheat flour and potato from Darshan's farm, or savoured the tea, gently flavoured with jaggery, can never find the food sold in upmarket stores, worthy of a second glance.

You can contact Darshan and Manwinder at 0172-2609082 or

as have been the
Please keep it up! ''

Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh

TO READ

Civil Society
FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE

'Feel good' is fine, but feel happy, secure is better

FALI S NARIMAN

An unreported speech in the Rajya Sabha during the passage of the recent interim budget made a powerful point.

SIR, during this debate on the Budget, the honourable members have attacked the government, the honourable ministers have supported the government but I would appeal to all sections of this House to congratulate the government, not for this Budget, but for nominating such a fine, distinguished economist Mr (Bimal) Jalan, who just spoke. He has made a signal non-political contribution and helped to raise the level of debate.

Sir, I have been in this House for nearly four years and the single fact that has impressed me during this period is the consistent, low key and soft-soft approach of the Leader of the House, only to be matched by the soft voiced and eloquent response of the Leader of the Opposition. I have great admiration for each of them. Despite great provocation at times, I have never seen or heard them ever raising their voices or ever raise the rhetoric of the debate. And I often wonder, and I tell my honourable colleagues, why all of us cannot emulate these two leading figures in this House of Elders.

The equitable temperament of the Finance Minister, I believe is reflected in his speech on the Interim Budget. There are no extravagant claims, no beating of the drum, except at least one of the concessions that are announced is apparently given with a view to impending elections. He that runs may read them. "The recommendation of the Fifth Central Pay Commission Report that DA should be merged with basic pay wherever DA exceeds 50% of pay with effect from 1 April, 2004, is clearly wooing a large number of voters, namely the government servants, without the financial implications of inflation. I wish the Finance Minister had used the same rational, restrained language, which he used in paragraph 31, when speaking about reviving upwards the standard deduction for income tax purposes. He said: "This question needs to be revisited." I wish he had said that.

But Sir, having said all this, unlike my learned colleagues, I have no figures to offer; I have no figures to refute. I have only some apprehensions to voice. I have uppermost in my mind what the Finance Minister said in the opening paragraph of his speech. He has said, "Growth statistics are very important, they are vital inputs." But for that reason he says that it is important for us to have, what he calls "gross national contentment" for an era of distributive justice. "It is," he says, "the catalyst that motivates redoubled national endeavour." I agree. I like this phrase "gross national contentment" because, as a non-party member it enables me to ventilate my apprehensions. The country will see greater and greater economic prosperity, and, if you will pardon my saying so, without reference to whichever government is there, because I always believe that the country is always greater than all the governments it has had and it will ever have. The Finance Minister envisages in his interim Budget Speech that there will be greater national contentment leading to national endeavour. But let us please examine what this means. It means greater contentment for all sections of society not for one section not for one community not for one class but for all.

I have an apprehension when I see visions of economic prosperity -like the Finance Minister --- but I also see visions of growing intolerance and religious bigotry and sometimes visions of hatred and as a member of a minority community I sometimes shudder. I also see visions of more and more unemployment. We cannot have national contentment, unless the minorities, the jobless, the unemployed, particularly the educated unemployed, are given hope and avenues of progress.

We are a pluralistic society with manifold cultures. We have a large pluralistic populace. If your party, Mr Finance Minister, envisages victory in the coming elections, then I wish you Godspeed. But I request your party to remember the



THE SPOKEN WORD

words of wisdom of a great British Prime Minister. When the Nazis were knocking at the doors of England during the time of the Second World War, he too had visions of victory. He said-those words are now famous—"in war determination, in peace goodwill, in defeat defiance, but in victory magnanimity."

If you are victorious in these elections, as you hope to be, you must, and I repeat you must, be magnanimous to all sections of society. Victory must not breed a sense of arrogance. Only then will you be able to have what you envisage, a gross national contentment, because after the party wins the elections, whatever the party, it must carry the country with it. Victory is good. But integrity of the country, as a whole is better. "Feel good" is a nice slogan. But I would respectfully suggest "feel happy and feel secure" is a far better slogan.

Fali S Nariman is a senior advocate and a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha

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.

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."

RAM GIDOOMAL CBE is Chairman, South Asian Development Partnership.

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.

Project Why has some answers

Anuradha Bakshi shows how to make sweepers into teachers

Civil Society News
New Delhi

WHY does the daughter of a diplomat, born in Prague, prefer to work in a Delhi slum? Her office is a tiny room in Giri Nagar bustee. Her list of clients includes dropouts, special children and impoverished nomads. Instead of a car, a ramshackle auto-rickshaw is parked at her gate. To finance her project, she dips into her inheritance. But 52-year-old Anuradha Goburdhun Bakshi is happy with her chosen destiny. "I make sweepers into teachers," she says with pride.

About one and a half years ago Anuradha started Project Why, which today provides 500 children with an education. She began Project Return -Renewable Energy Technologies in Urban Rural Networks-some months ago to inspire slum dwellers to go back to their villages. Under this programme, bio-diesel extracted from karanji seeds is used to run power plants, gensets, make fertiliser and soap. A group of Bihari migrants identified karanji trees in their village and are keen to return and process bio-diesel. In Delhi Anuradha plans to hire rag-pickers to collect seeds and offers them literacy classes.

Anuradha's family are bhoomihars from Barka Koppa in Patna district, Bihar, one of India's poorest states. She identifies lack of electricity as an important reason for the state's poverty. People cannot run gensets to mine groundwater. As a result, small farmers suffer and youngsters end up joining private armies to survive.

In 1871, Anuradha's great grandfather Goverdhan Singh, indentured labourer no 354495, left for Mauritius on board SS Nimrod. He returned to marry and dig a well for his village. Her grandfather, Gopinath Sinha, was a freedom fighter, in and out of jail. Her mother, Kamala, refused to marry till India gained freedom. In 1947 she was 30 and driving a truck for the Red Cross to ferry supplies for famine victims.

By the time Anuradha was born, the family had prospered. Her father, Sri Ram Goburdhun, a judge, educated at the Inner Temple and the University of Lille, was persuaded by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, to become an Indian citizen. He became a diplomat and served as an Ambassador.

So Anuradha lived a life of luxury in various capitals. She learnt French before English or Hindi. Life was a lark, with cruises and parties. She qualified for the IAS but opted to become a French translator for Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Married to an executive, she has two lovely daughters, Parul, a social psychologist and Shamika who works for

autistic children.

And then suddenly between 1990 and 1992, her parents passed away. Anuradha was devastated. Her father's last words were: "Don't ever lose faith in India." Her mother explained the ground reality: "When I was the young child of a poor priest, my cousins were wealthy. They

local healer, a poor Nepalese woman whom she calls Mataji, through an acquaintance, at Giri Nagar. Mataji told her the collar was a decoy. "It leads you away from what you should be doing. Get rid of it and start examining yourself through involved work for the needy."

After nine years Anuradha threw away

learning is beyond them. Add to that the abuse, mockery and caning and you have the perfect recipe for future outlaws."

Anuradha began by offering slum children an English-speaking course. She has 35 teachers who are paid salaries between Rs 1500 and Rs 3000 and are from slums. The minimum qualification is Class 8, though many are graduates. "If I can get a girl of Class 9 to teach a child in Class 1, then why not," she reasons. Anuradha's monthly budget of Rs 85,000 is spent on salaries and rent.

The children come after school, depending on their shift. Everyone sits on the floor. Each classroom is divided into small groups, each with a teacher. In this way every child gets special attention. The teachers work through the year, except on Sundays. "We don't have any discipline problem," says one teacher, "the children always attend class, rain or shine."

The pass percentage among Project Why's children is now 98%. Last year, ten children appeared for the CBSE exam and passed with flying colours. There are children and adults with muscular dystrophy, mental retardation, deafness and other disabilities. Muhammad Hussain, once a sweeper, teaches 50 children on six computers.

The Planet Why shop sells T-shirts, jute bags and other eco-friendly crafts made by the children. A dispensary, run by a disabled man who travels nearly 60 kms everyday, provides basic health care. "He has never missed a single day of work," says Anuradha.

The government school has well paid teachers who spend their time knitting sweaters, says Anuradha's executive assistant Rani. Anuradha's prescription is straightforward. "In the RK Puram government school, where children of educated middle-class families enrol, teachers do their job. Here families are poor. We need to make parents put pressure on them."

(Inputs from Good News India)



Anuradha Bakshi with Manu, a special student

would grudgingly give me a sweet but only after pointedly licking it on all sides. Don't ever forget that such pettiness happens all the time in this land. They can scar lives."

Anuradha plunged into depression and developed physical symptoms. Her doctor said she had spondylitis and fitted her with a collar. In 1998, Shamika found herself a misfit in Indian schools. Anuradha wondered why. Earlier she had visited her village and was welcomed by her kin. Yet the poverty made her gloomy. Why, she wondered.

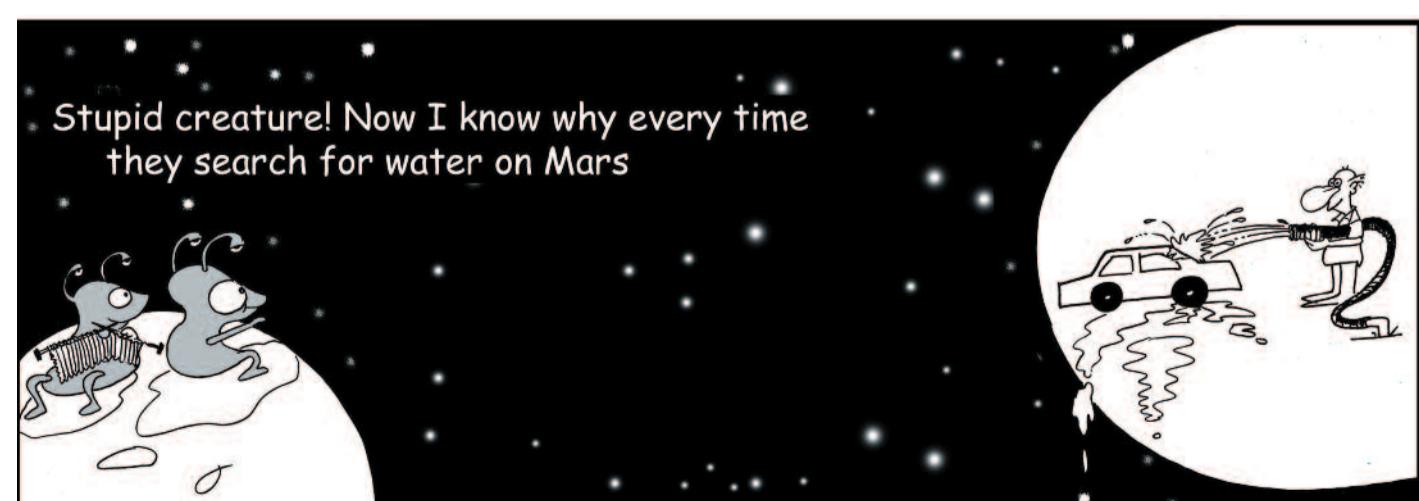
She decided to do something. She began a trust in her father's name and began supplying nutritious biscuits to undernourished children. But it gave her little satisfaction. Then in 2001, she met a

her collar. Coincidentally, she met Manu a handicapped boy living on the streets. Children flung stones at him. Neighbours threw food at him. He was abused and neglected. Anuradha rented a hovel. She cared for Manu and showered him with affection. His transformation drew attention. Soon, other parents began bringing their handicapped children to her. A friend bought her a shanty for Rs 70,000 and the Sri Ram Goburdhun Trust had an address.

Anuradha finally found answers. Poor adults lived without hope and their children never overcame poverty. "We don't realise how much a dysfunctional school system contributes to social discord," says Anuradha. "The formal schools end up convincing children that

DEVELOPMENTTOON

BY



DEAR DR SWAMINATHAN...AN OPEN LETTER BY SUMAN SAHAI

Weed out babus, bring in real talent

To

Dr MS Swaminathan,
Head, Farmers' Commission,
Govt of India

Dear Dr. Swaminathan,

Those committed people who work in the field of food and agriculture and have followed the fate of farmers in these last difficult years have chafed at the neglect of the farm sector in an agricultural economy like ours. It simply did not make sense to neglect our most valuable asset and exacerbate our greatest vulnerability. Was there no shepherd to guide the fortunes of the 100 million farm families that are both the nation's greatest strength and also constitute its soft underbelly?

When the news was announced that you would head the Farmers' Commission and would be entrusted the task of making a plan to improve the lot of farmers and ensure their livelihoods, as also the nation's food security, many were pleased. Your formidable experience in India and your understanding of the global dimensions of the problems associated with agriculture in food sensitive countries across the world, have as always, raised a lot of expectations. I daresay you will be flooded with suggestions and recommendations from the worthiest in the land who, if they haven't done so already, will be jamming your mailbox with how to get it right. Far be it from me to tell you how to do your job in the Commission; but I do want to tell you of our expectations. We at Gene Campaign have had a long and close association with you and we have the right to tell you what we want from you now.

For starters, could you please have a lot of really good community organisations, field workers, people (especially women) from farming and tribal communities, homemakers who feed their families, academics, NGOs and those who fit under the umbrella of 'civil society' organisations, as members on the Commission. Please also try to keep the number of babus really small and pick those ones who not just understand agriculture but who have a track record of trying to do the right thing for farmers and adivasis. There are many like that, only they get left behind in the sycophancy race in Ministries. At any rate, please make sure you keep out the creeps who have been hanging around the Agriculture Ministry forever and have a proven record of opposing the rights and interests of farmers, in favour of the big corporations.

It would be good to do a large multi-stakeholder consultation to hear the suggestions of people living in various parts of rural India, associated either directly or indirectly with farming. You could constitute groups of people headed by a member of the Commission, who could interact with farmers and pass on the problems, expectations and desires of those in their region, who would find it difficult to reach you. NGOs working in the field can also be entrusted this task. This way, you would get the views of many different kinds of people and decisions the Commission members take incorporating these views would have legitimacy and the support of people.

There is little you do not yourself understand about farming and food production and there are enough technically outstanding people in our agricultural research system to make a superb team. I only want to caution that the outstanding people have somehow fallen by the wayside, transferred out of the mainstream, to little outposts, their talents unutilised. In the formal mainline system, it is really the scum that has risen to the top; it will take some doing but try to keep this lot out. Please send out emissaries who can bring back those keen thinking scientists that are working in tandem with farmers, tucked away in little known research stations and put together your scientific team. The Farmers Commission under your guidance must glow with fervour and brilliance so that the country can repose its trust in it.

There are a few substantive issues I would like to point out as well. You are witness to the controversial entry of genetically modified crops into this country, shrouded in secrecy, defying the peoples' right to information and unable to shrug the charges that it was Monsanto's interest, not that of farmers that was being served. The former Secretary of the DBT (Department of Biotechnology) doggedly refused to allow a national biotechnology policy to be formulated even when all shades of opinion were demanding one. Using political connections, this official (now retired after five extensions) took ad hoc decisions almost unilaterally and pushed all manner of GM crops in the absence of a policy and a national consensus. I hope you and your team will use your influence to put

an end to this kind of arbitrary high handedness and ensure that there is a policy in this country. Please ensure that farmers and other stakeholders are the ones to formulate policy through a dialogue with technical experts.

I hope you will put an end to the nonsensical research programs that were sanctioned by the DBT. For example, the research on inserting the insulin gene into groundnuts to find a cure for diabetes. Insulin is a protein. Once the insulin-carrying groundnut was eaten, the insulin would be digested by the gastric juices in the stomach just like all the other protein in the groundnut and lose its identity. Proteins are broken down in the digestive tract into amino acids, which are then absorbed by the body as nutrition. The same thing would happen to insulin. For this reason, the insulin dependent diabetic can only be treated with injections since this is the only way that insulin retains its integrity when it reaches the bloodstream. So this nonsensical research is conceptually flawed, headed nowhere and a waste of the taxpayers' money.

Can I point out another disastrous piece of research supported by the redoubtable DBT?



Jamia Hamdard in Delhi has been given a grant to develop genetically modified medicinal plants! It is difficult to get crazier than this. Medicinal plants produce very special chemicals (many of them have to be used with extreme care), under certain specific conditions. Tampering with these conditions is likely to change the properties of the plant making it useless medicinally. That is why no chemical fertilisers and pesticides are used when medicinal plants are cultivated. The impact of introducing a foreign gene into a medicinal plant can be potentially disastrous since these plants can produce dangerous chemicals like toxins or allergens.

The famous case of a GM corn, Starlink, produced in the US should be remembered for the fact that allergens can be produced in GM crops, the natural versions of which had none. A potentially life threatening allergenic property was found in a GM soybean variety bred by using a gene from the Brazil nut. Fortunately this was detected in time, before harm could be done and the GM Soya was withdrawn. This project on medicinal plants reflects the mindless way in which the DBT is promoting GM research, without any regard for relevance, appropriateness or even plain common sense. Could your Commission lay down strict strictures that such nonsense is not repeated? There is so much more that I have to say, but space, as always, is a constraint. Perhaps when your Commission is listening to the views of stakeholders, Gene Campaign will get its chance and we will have the opportunity to come and tell you all about our work in the field with farmers and the views we have formulated collectively.

With regards and good wishes,

Suman Sahai,
Gene Campaign,
New Delhi

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

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

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

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

Do you think NGO activists should join politics?

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

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

How difficult was it to

make the transition?

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

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

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

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

Do people have one kind of expectations from an



NGO leader and another from a politician?

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

What have you achieved by joining politics?

For the first time, all agricultural workers are being provided an identity card in Gujarat. Nearly 34,000 cards have been issued. This will make them eligible for all government schemes. We have implemented this. Certainly things are a bit tardy, but the decision is historic in itself.

About 1,24,000 acres has been acquired by the state which we have distributed so

far to 67,000, chiefly tribals. We have put the issue of common property resources and how the state should manage these on the party's agenda. Even our manifesto for district elections shows this. We see districts as autonomous units with their own policies and programmes for land use, water etc

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

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

What is your view of the Election Commission order seeking

disclosures from candidates? Can NGOs monitor this process?

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

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

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

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

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

'NGOs will have to learn to reinvent themselves'

Sunita Narain took over as the director of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) from its founder, Anil Agarwal. It was a difficult mantle to inherit. Agarwal's standing as an environmentalist and original thinker is tough to emulate. CSE revolved around him. Narain was his trusted lieutenant, but few gave her much of a chance in taking the organisation towards new goals. However, two public campaigns have shown that CSE is in good health. The tests on bottled water and soft drinks have highlighted issues of national concern. The organisation has stood up to rigorous scrutiny. Extracts from an interview Narain gave Civil Society.

So, you have got the better of Coke and Pepsi, two mega brands. It must make you happy.

I'm not sure that it makes me happy because we never started off by trying to get the better of them. I would be much happier if government changed its regulation. From the very beginning, we were interested in regulation and the larger issues. If today you can ask me this question it is because Coke and Pepsi have made it out to be a war of us versus them. When we tested bottled water we did not pit ourselves against those companies. After our results were made public, the debate shifted to government and regulation. But after we tested soft drinks, both Coke and Pepsi chose to denigrate our research and single us out and naturally we had to defend ourselves. It is most unfortunate. We did not want it to be this way.

Okay. You have been interested in the larger issues. But you chose Coke and Pepsi because they were convenient targets. It was easier to choose them as targets than to raise the issues in more complex and complicated contexts.

The honest answer would be that we never made them a target. I am very clear about this. We started off with bottled water. We stumbled into soft drinks. When we stumbled into soft drinks we did not even know that there were just two companies that controlled the market.

You knew they were big brands but did not know their reach...

We thought there would be many companies. In bottled water there were many companies, in automobiles there were many companies. Here, too, we thought that there would be many companies with varying shares of the market. It was only when we began putting together our samples that we realised that there were only two companies who controlled more than 90 per cent of the market and by then we had already begun our study. The honest answer is that we did not target them.

But I will also be honest with you and tell you that it did matter that they were two big companies. After we released our study, and the way in which they reacted and took us on, it became a case of David vs Goliath. This was not our intention. But in retrospect, seeing the way government and media reacted, it did matter that they were two companies.

CSE's way of functioning, through our green rating project for industry and so on, has been to encourage good practice. We don't work with industry or against industry.

It was repeatedly asked by executives of the two companies why you did not go to them with your findings instead of going to the media.

That is not the way we work. We do our work and put it in the public domain. I've written about this and I'll repeat it. We began by wanting to do a municipal water study, but we did not find a thread. We found there was a big difference in where the water was sourced from, where it was filtered and when it reaches your home. We realised that unless we did a really comprehensive study over a year we might not be able to get a proper trend.



Sunita Narain, CSE's Director.

It was then that we checked bottled water. When we found pesticides in bottled water we asked ourselves where it was coming from. This led us to groundwater. You must understand that we did not know they were using groundwater. Like good journalists, my colleagues got into the plants and collected samples of the groundwater. We found that they contained pesticides and the profiles matched what was in the bottles.

When we released our study we received e-mails from people who said now that we had tested bottled water, we should test soft drinks as well because they are using the same water. You will recall Ramesh Chauhan went on record saying that if we were really serious about pesticides we should look at soft drinks!

It was round this time that I was visited by a senior executive of Pepsi who gave me a long lecture on nationalism and patriotism and told me that we did not know what we were talking about. I ended that meeting wondering why Pepsi should be so worked up. We had given their bottled water a good rating. So why were they so worried? So I think curiosity and a bit of outrage resulted in us doing the soft drinks study.

We found the same thing. They were also using groundwater. The only other thing we did, because the study could not get samples from the factories, where security had been made stringent, was to compare the samples with those from the US. When we checked

the US samples it was very clear to us that there were pesticides.

What is the role that you see civil society playing in relation to corporations and in defence of consumer and citizen interests?

I think civil society will have to reinvent itself in the context of rapid industrialisation and economic growth. In the past 20 years we have dealt with issues of inequity, access and development.

Now what you are seeing is that you will have to deal with all those issues but you will have to deal with them with a very high order of technical competence. Because the kind of pressure that this industrialisation will bring, civil society will have to provide the balance. It is an important role because industry and government have always worked very well together. Let's be very clear that despite all the talk of liberalisation that relationship will only get stronger.

And work to the exclusion of the citizen.

Exactly. And in the current climate, there is almost a negation of another point of view, even as deregulation is being speeded up and government is abdicating its role. Civil society will therefore have to be ready to speak up about what is going wrong. It will take a very high order of skills, knowledge and commitment to be able to intervene.

So what you are saying is that NGOs like yourselves will have to begin looking at newer thresholds in the way in which they function.

Well, first is the mechanism for finance. Funders have so far come to Indian civil society organisations because they want a particular study done and these organisations have worked as contract agencies. Clearly that is going to have to change. Then comes the issue of institutional structures that will allow you to go in for sustained fights. It is important, as Anil used to say, to institutionalise advocacy. Our clean air campaign began in 1996, the CNG buses came in 2002 and we are still in court. Then it is important to have highly skilled people. But the problem with such people invariably is that they are non-believers. They could be working in a Colgate factory or in CSE. So, what you need is a combination of passion and skills.

In today's environment you have to be very certain about your technical information. If we at CSE had got half a fact wrong, we would have been finished.

Let the heart rule

ANIL WILSON

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

The roots of this situation can be traced to the fact that somewhere along the line we gave up all efforts at educating the heart and have concentrated only on educating the head. The fanatical obsession with the earning power of learning that concomitantly postulates an irrelevance of all other pedagogical activity has created a situation where there is little or no interest in the moral dimensions of learning. Inevitably therefore, we are losing the most fundamental vocation of the human intellect, which is its humanizing potential and its capacity to address practical moral dimensions of day-to-day living.

We have forgotten that the only true vocation of education – any kind of education — is to continually enhance, not the earning but the humanizing power of the human race. Thus our study of literature is important only if it sensitizes us to the importance of human feelings and emotions, our study of economics is significant only if it sensitizes us to the human condition in the context of the material aspects of life, our study of history is meaningful only if it sensitizes us to the forces that impel human life and bring happiness and misery in their wake, our study of the sciences is momentous only if it sensitizes us to the parameters of human existence and the infinite patterns and rhythms of life. However, today we study a subject not for its sensitizing potential but for its potential earning power.

No wonder that a university education has become a commodity and not a life altering experience. No wonder that a college is seen as a transit camp to the work place instead of an incubator for the transformation of the individual. The effect of such an intellectualism alienated from fundamental human values is there for all to see: we have life without consciousness, sound without meaning; power without responsibility, opinion without rational process; we accept criminals, we admire dictators, we confuse teaching with learning, degrees with competence, and fluency with the ability to think afresh. The natural result is an intellectual and moral vacuum that is filled up by populist rhetoric on the one hand and coercion and corruption on the other.

Power brokers have always realised that in order to control people you first need to control the educational matrices that determine a people. Dilute education of values and you have control over people. This is because people with values cannot be ruled over except by the values they hold dear. Undermine their sense of integrity and you promote not merit but pull, not ability but 'networking'. Set up standards of achievement available to the most inept and you kill the impetus towards improvement, towards excellence, towards perfection. Tagore's dream for his country: "where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection" ("Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high") becomes a laughable fantasy of a romantically fevered mind.

The fundamental value of 'rigour' that characterizes any worthwhile educational process is now under attack with examining Boards vying with each other in proclaiming how "student-friendly" (a euphemism for "how easy") their courses are. Such a denuding of values from education has produced the archetypal post-modern man: one who cheats and lies but preserves a respectable façade. He is aware that he is dishonest but this does not trouble him as long as he believes that others think he is honest and he derives his self-respect from this illusory perception.

Daniel Fusfeld, a well-known economist, tells the story of a monk from the Middle

Ages who made a pilgrimage to Rome where he bought a silver chalice for the cathedral in his hometown. On his return trip to Germany he showed his acquisition to a couple of merchants. The merchants congratulated him on his purchase and applauded his sense of trade in paying far less than what the chalice was actually worth.

The merchants were taken aback on finding that their observations had disturbed the monk so much that he went back to Rome to pay a more acceptable price to the salesman. While for the merchants the behaviour of the monk served to show the 'irrational' influence that a sense of values can have on economic dealings, for the monk price-consciousness meant paying the just price.

The point is that we have blurred the difference between value and price, between education and advocacy. We have forgotten that there is a basic difference between 'teaching a subject' and 'educating an individual': and that the true vocation of education is the latter. To recognize this distinction is to recognize the fact that there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. All education—no matter what the subject, no matter what form of presentation—carries a predisposition, a specific inclination, a value. There is no such thing as an 'unbiased education'. Moreover, education in its true sense must have a subversive element. It must subvert popular perceptions, paternalistic prescriptive programmes, all principles or beliefs concerning human affairs that are autonomous of the human and the humane.

Education can never be the handmaiden of society while advocacy invariably is.

What ever be the wider ramifications of such a debate, (and there are many) the fact remains that we need to recognize that much of what goes under the garb of education is only advocacy. The present approach, where 'value education' is presented as a separate discipline, appears to suggest that while the general mass of education is 'value-free' or 'value-less' yet 'value' has a role to play that is an adjunct role in the form of a subsidiary to main line subjects.

Moreover, the defenders of value-free education insist that in the kind of setting that we have today, we cannot stress the values and beliefs of some, while ignoring the values of others. And so, they say, we'll avoid all the problems inherent in this situation by simply agreeing to ignore all values. This specious argument which suggests that there can be no fixed points of reference have made our educational institutions become centers of intellectual disorder. This has resulted in a closing of the human heart.

The intellectual cacophony that surrounds us can only be resolved if we realize that an education that ignores moral and spiritual values cannot qualify as a quality education. We need to affirm the fact that just as there is an order in the realm of nature proposed by the laws of science, an order in the field of reason postulated by the laws of logic, so too is there a moral order – a moral order that is a transcendent, unchanging moral order, independent of sectarian beliefs — and this moral order needs to be restored to its central place in the educational process. This task is possible only when we recognize that values, and not 'pure facts' however 'technically correct' they may be, are the foundation stones of any society. Modern education has largely separated virtue from knowledge and has thereby

severed the link between the mind and the heart.

Any worthwhile education cannot afford to ignore either the mind or the heart. Together they form the vital links in the chain of civilization. Thus, education to be truly meaningful needs to move away from the conventional 'survival learning' and move towards 'generative learning'. This implies that the aim and purpose of any and all kinds of study is to get to the heart of what it means to be human. Through such a study, be it that of Physics or Economics,

Engineering or Literature, the teacher and the student essentially recreate themselves, re-perceive the world and their relationship to it and thus become a part of the generative process of life. All that this requires is a realignment of our pedagogical priorities with the focus on the common human desire for a life elevated by dignity, decency and moral progress.

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



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Sadbya, Sadban aur Sadbna

ANUPAM MISHRA

At the very outset I must confess that these three Hindi words are difficult to translate. They represent the means, the ends and a kind of penance. I did not choose this title to score a point or satisfy my ego. I chose it because all NGOs, their coordinators, workers, generous funding agencies-- whether *desi* or foreign---and people's movements, regardless of size and reach, should ponder over these three words.

A debate rages over the question of funding. It gets particularly stormy when it comes to foreign funding. Invariably the debate centres on the ends and the means. Perhaps there would be some clarity if we stopped for a moment to consider *sadbna* or penance as well.

For only penance will tell us what the people really want. And, when we know that and direct our energies at achieving it, the means and the ends will fall in place.

In my opinion the source of funding is not very important. The money can be raised from the local village, *mohalla* or city. It could be sent across the seven seas. There can be divergent opinions on the best sources of funding.

What is more important is the outcome. The end result must be what we the people want. Apart from a few exceptions we don't have a clear idea of what we wish to achieve. NGOs or civil society movements keep shifting their focus.

Most of us will recall at one time social forestry fetched a high price on the environment stock market. Funding came from four corners of the globe and we rounded up a few million dollars. The best among us started implementing social forestry projects without first debating what precisely was "unsocial forestry".

And then suddenly this flag was brought down. In its place, one fine morning, the brand new flag of wasteland development was unfurled. This time, too, nobody cared to define wastelands. A lot of money, energy and time were spent by eminent members of society in the wasteland development venture.

Initially, a small department in the central government handled the idea. It was replaced by a new ministry. Lots of NGOs, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, began doing wasteland development.

But like its previous avatar, wasteland development died in its infancy.

There were no condolence meetings to mourn the death of this "marvellous" scheme and we soon started celebrating the birth of a new movement called watershed development.

This programme has been translated and adapted into various languages. In Hindi-speaking states, watershed development is called "Jalagam Vikas". In Maharashtra, it is termed "Panlot" and elsewhere it is called "Pandhal". Despite the *desi* badge, the programme does not touch our hearts.

For the moment, our best NGOs are putting their most talented people, from urban and rural areas, into developing a few watersheds here and there. Nobody knows when we will begin shedding tears over this programme.

Running neck and neck with watershed development is Joint Forest Management (JFM). Here, too, some NGOs are ahead of the rest in providing a *desi* touch. So JFM is called "Sanyukt Van Prabandh" in some regional dialects.

Grassroots NGOs who object to the Sankritised word *sanyukt*, opt for the more colloquial *sanjha*. But essentially JFM is a programme and its end result has been dictated by the World Bank or some similar institutions.

I do not wish to narrate all this to poke fun. These are serious matters. If our society really needed the JFM programme, we should have first seriously reflected on the administration of forests by individual agencies and their managers. Who were they?

How long did their authority last? Whom did they snatch these forests from? How did the country's forest cover dwindle to 10% when it should have been 33%? We have paid a price for deforestation.

Floods in Orissa, Chattisgarh and Bihar and drought in 18 states are the net outcome.

The people who mismanaged these forests and the political leadership which protected them should have apologised publicly before JFM was launched.

We must also remember who the true managers of the forests were, how they were dispossessed by the British and looted of their green gold.

It is much the same story with programmes in areas other than the environment. Numerous plans exist on women's empowerment, child rights, reproductive health and formation of self-help groups. Every NGO implements the same programmes, regardless of political ideology.

The leftists, the rightists, the Gandhians, the missionaries, even the RSS display a rare consensus. The monoculture of ideas is alarming. It seems there is an invisible mint somewhere in the West, which constantly coins new terms for us to fill our pockets with.

So should we believe everybody has sold out? No, there are some heroes who have bravely fought the idea of monoculture. After the Emergency in the 1970s, a few drove out Coca-Cola and IBM. To commemorate this great victory, a cold drink called Double Seven was introduced. But Coca-Cola re-emerged, in the garb of our heroes, drowning Double Seven and our original champions.

This is a beautiful example of co-existence.

So this debate on ends and means, funds from here and there, will lead us nowhere. The answer is to find a good mission and for that to happen we have to look within. Once we have our own ends, the means will follow.

A small example can be narrated from a village near Jaipur. In this drought prone area a routine NGO constructed a tank to harvest water. It invested some 30,000 rupees in the project.

The tank narrowed the distance between the NGO and the community. At one of the meetings an elderly person suggested constructing a small temple and a *chhatri* on the embankment of the tank. But the cost of constructing the *chhatri* and the temple was not in the NGO's budget.

The NGO explained that it could get a grant for the tank but not for the *chhatri*. But the elderly person politely replied that the village was not asking for money from the NGO. Within a month the villagers collected the amount and the *chhatri* was constructed.

Most of our NGO friends will consider the money spent as wasteful expenditure, but for the villagers this is the difference between a house and a home.

They need water structures that belong to them. And when they own something they protect and maintain it. Otherwise it's a kind of PWD structure.

We should not forget in this land of 500,000 villages and few thousand towns there were two million water structures before the British came. There was no water mission, no watershed development programme.

Society created these structures using its own resources. There was no Zilla Bank or World Bank at that time, but the Village Bank. There was an invisible and invincible structure to carry out this job in a country that has a Cherrapunji as well as a Jaisalmer.

Now we talk about people's participation and PRA – Participatory Research Appraisal. We get funds from within and outside, but our aims and ends do not represent the needs of the people. We keep on pushing a different agenda. If we were to invest half our energy in understanding our society, we would generate enough means from within. But that requires a kind of penance.

(Anupam Mishra works for the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi.)



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Tribals civilised, but CPI(M)?

MAHASWETA DEVI

I never went to tribal areas thinking I would write about them. I just knew that I loved them and I have a lot to learn from them. I went there as people go to meet each other. It is my good luck that they accepted me. Tribals and the underprivileged never find anyone from our class to be with them. I have stood by them through thick and thin.

I was in Palamu in the 1970s. This region's beautiful forests were being cut and trees taken away for pulp mills. I was deeply saddened. Tribals and non-tribals got so much from the forest. I remember going into the interiors of Hazaribagh and Singhbhum.

No, the people did not own land but they survived because of the forest. There were tribal uprisings and demonstrations, but then outsiders would arrive and recruit local women to act as agents for the brick kiln owners and small miners. The tribals lived off the forest, but they did not have saris. The agent would approach them with a new one and say they could organise fantastic working arrangements. If you go there, you will eat plenty and come home with a lot of money, they would say. But it never happened like that.

In 1981 I formed the Bonded Labour Association of Palamu. For the first time, thousands of bonded labour came to the district town of Daltonganj. Their *roti* and *rozi* was linked to the forests. They didn't have anything else. They worked for big farmers, got very little and debt kept them in bondage for generations.

I talk about forests because tribals could not even survive there since they were encroached upon. They became shelterless and migrated to the cities. I have walked miles through West Bengal's districts. Everywhere I have seen nature attacked and the condition people live in, turn miserable.

Before Rabindranath Tagore died, he wrote a frantic letter to Mahatma Gandhi asking him to protect Shantiniketan. Gandhi promised he would do his utmost but he died soon after Independence. Shantiniketan was entrusted to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Parliament passed the Vishwa Bharati Act. Shantiniketan's area was demarcated and could not be encroached upon. Its undulating landscape has a *khoai* through which every year during the monsoon water from nearby rivers fills ponds and lakes.

From 1936 to 1938, I studied there. It was a small place, but we thought Shantiniketan had no boundary. Prantik areas, belonging to Santhals and other poor non-tribals, came under the Sriniketan and Shantiniketan Development Authority (SSDA), headed by Somnath Chatterjee of the CPI(M), presently the Speaker of Parliament.

Legally, you cannot buy tribal land. But if you are a tribal and you want to sell your land to me, I can buy under the name of a non-existent tribal. So I cut a deal with you and we go to the local land revenue office, where it is done.

So the tribals and poor non-tribals became landless and suffered great economic distress. Buildings started being constructed. A 300-year-old natural water body, with 18 acres of natural forests filled with bamboo, was destroyed. Migratory birds would flock here for three months to lay their eggs. People treated them as honoured guests, making sure they were never molested or teased.

SSDA have introduced big promoters and contractors. They have dredged the water tank dry and they are going to build an amusement park. In March this year during Shantiniketan's spring festival I spoke to the media. I told them, Birbhum is a dry district. To rob nearby villages of their only source of water and replace it with a park that will have grasshoppers in crystal to amuse children and an artificial sandy beach is wrong.

Somnath Chatterjee vehemently protested. We filed a PIL in end April in the Calcutta High Court. We don't know what its result will be because, don't forget, Somnath Chatterjee belongs to the ruling party in West Bengal. He is a veteran Parliamentarian.

Garbage and plastic bags are strewn around Shantiniketan. The SSDA has done nothing. Permits for buses to ply through the heart of the town were issued. Two years ago, a fantastic car rally route was mapped. There are licensed bars outside the area. The pollution control board till date has not exercised its authority and sides with the builders.

We are afraid. We have approached the President of India and KR Narayanan, our former President, to visit Shantiniketan or send an expert team. I read that the environment minister of West Bengal says natural water bodies, if they are not used for

fish cultivation, should not exist.

All over West Bengal huge areas of water bodies have been sealed off. If there is a devastating fire, even in Kolkata, it will be very difficult to extinguish it. When we filed this case, local people who were fighting against this devastation of nature began to approach me with details.

In Habra, North 24 Parganas, the municipality dredged a water body and built a house. That water was being used for an annual swimming competition, emersion of idols after *puja* and for washing and bathing. West Bengal is full of poor people in rural and urban areas who don't have water connections. In Kolkata too, where are the huge tanks we used to see?

I have travelled to universities in Europe and America. Nobody can even think of encroaching on land or building amusement parks in Cambridge or Sussex. Yet our local papers say that land given to peasants for agricultural development has been bought by the owner of a cinema hall so that he could launch Geetanjali, an entertainment centre. How does it benefit the local people?

I am asked what I have done to bring tribals and denotified tribes into the mainstream. I do not believe in bringing them to the mainstream. It has nothing to offer them. Tribals are much more civilised, it's true. They are tolerant and scientific. They understand nature and there is no superstition among them.

When the solar or lunar eclipse takes place, the Hindus don't eat or cook. But the Kheria Sabars of Purulia are of scientific temperament. During the last solar eclipse they congregated on a big open ground to view the eclipse. They carried rice, lentils and their cooking utensils, lit fires and celebrated. Why not, they said, the eclipse is part of nature's routine and we honour it. Animals and birds in the jungle will eat and drink water. Trees are getting nourishment. So why should we not eat?

The Sabars sang and danced. They brought their children to see the eclipse, because it is a rare phenomenon. Afterwards they placed small boulders near the tree where they had cooked so that their children, would one day recall that they had come here, long time ago, when the sky turned black.

I have been working for the Lohas, the Sabars and the Dhikaru, the so-called criminal tribes. I believe in helping them organise, making the administration listen and give them what is promised on paper.

In 1983, Gopi Ballabh Singh Deo, then a schoolteacher who is close to the Sabar community, formed a small organisation. He wanted to arrange melas where other Sabars could come and intermingle. I was invited and in November 1983 we formed the West Bengal Sabar Kalyan Samiti in Maldi village.

We organised our mela to which 30,000 tribals and non-tribals came. It became an annual feature for a while. We did not want our Samiti to be an FRCA one. Ordinary people contributed. We

started schools, which became a nucleus. Balmer Lawrie helped us get a big tank for fish cultivation.

Money from the UNDP helped our Samiti recover land for tribals, build hostels, schools and community huts. We own a tractor and have made rocky land cultivable. Today they cultivate two crops and their purchasing power has increased. Nearly 21 to 23 lift irrigation schemes are operative. The West Bengal government has done nothing for the tribals.

Their settlements need roads, drinking water, irrigation, electricity, schools. In the Samiti's hostel, a new generation of Sabar youngsters are being educated. Children cultivate vegetables in the hostel area, it's very new for them. The Sabars have no dowry system or bride burning all the social ills of mainstream society. They are an independent and liberal people. Young people are free to marry whom they love, what is a house without children and love?

In 1998 we formed the Denotified and Nomadic Tribals Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG) at Baroda after the death of Budhan Sabar, tortured by the police. We managed to get compensation for his family but I realised we would have to fight for the rights of DNTs and nomadic tribes all over India.



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Laughter in the time of conflict

JUG SURAIYA

In Romain Gary's *The Dance of Genghis Cohn*, the eponymous protagonist, a Jewish comedian, faces a Nazi extermination squad. As the guns are raised, the doomed man turns and presents his bare posterior to his killers, exhorting them to kiss it. By this seemingly futile gesture of defiance, the helpless victim turns the tables on his vanquishers. Cohn's soul leaves his bullet-ridden body and comes to roost within the Nazi officer. Gary's message is clear: by refusing to acquiesce in his inevitable destruction, the seedy clown achieves a subversive after-life.

The parable of Genghis Cohn (the name itself is a cross-cultural pun underlining the universality of the hero/victim) suggests the use of laughter as an instrument of liberation. As Hannah Arendt and others reflecting on the Holocaust have stressed, language assumes progressive importance as the conditions it seeks to describe become increasingly unspeakable; silence represents the irreversible triumph of the oppressor. Of all the forms of communication which attempt to bear witness to the embattled human condition, perhaps none is as potent as laughter.

Laughter is the revenge of the ant against the elephant which seeks to stomp it into oblivion, the incongruity of the act exerting the force of a moral ju-jitsu to throw the disproportionately powerful aggressor into ridicule. Little wonder that laughter is taboo under all totalitarian dispensations.

A distinction needs to be made between the mechanics of humour and the spirit of satire. Humour is a man stepping on a banana peel; satire is created when the man stepping on a banana skin is the corrupt municipal official who has been cutting corners on garbage removal and now is about to be hoist with his own petard, or peel. Satire is humour with a moral cutting edge and walks the tightrope between the individual and the collective, freedom and necessity, faith and despair, the mask of comedy that slips to show the grinning skull beneath the skin. Humour depends on the conditioned response; satire creates an unconditional response to circumscription. (While both Hitler and Stalin were patrons of the predictable robotics of slapstick, the

Man of Steel developed an Achilles' heel in the form of an irreverent mouse called Mickey, and Hitler met his match in a Little Tramp who stood the Great Dictator on his head.) Paronomasia, the so-called lowest form of wit, exemplifies the dual nature of satire. At its best, the pun acts as a semantic zip fastener to bring together opposing and apparently contradictory elements to form an unseamly – pun intended – whole which is larger and more meaningful than the sum of its parts, a gestalt in which jest is revealed as truth, and vice versa. The resultant tension seeks release via the safety valve of laughter, which often with pain is fraught. If satire is a cruel business, it is so only because life is. If cruelty – including the ultimate cruelty of mortality – were to be taken from it, life might conceivably be worth living; but it would no longer be worth satirising.

Which would be a pity, if one accepts the definition of the human animal as a creature whose humanity consists of his capacity to laugh and to cry, and not always to know the one from the other.

This business of satire, of laughing because we seem no longer to be able to weep, becomes all the more necessary in what euphemistically are called "troubled times", when more than ever our common humanity is at stake. But it is at such times that laughter is most frowned upon: at best, it is seen to be an inappropriate and insensitive

frivolity; at worst, a catalyst likely further to provoke already inflamed passions. Such arguments gain vehemence whenever religious issues are involved, and particularly so in the context of those who are deemed patronisingly to lack in "sophistication", and by implication in a sense of humour, which is another word for humanity. You can't make fun of religion and get away with it, say those who mouth the conventional wisdom, pointing an admonitory finger at Salman Rushdie. Such caveats beg several questions, not the least of which is that Rushdie's plight has no longer anything to do with religion and everything to do with the politics of religion, which is an entirely different issue. Christian commentators on the Rushdie affair, however, should note Umberto Eco's fictional thesis that Catholicism suppressed Aristotle's apocryphal treatise on laughter lest its pagan influence undermine the absolute authority of the Church.

The "unsophisticated" of the so-called Third World have long taken delight in religion (as distinct from religiosity) which is resonant with a virile laughter, be it occasioned by

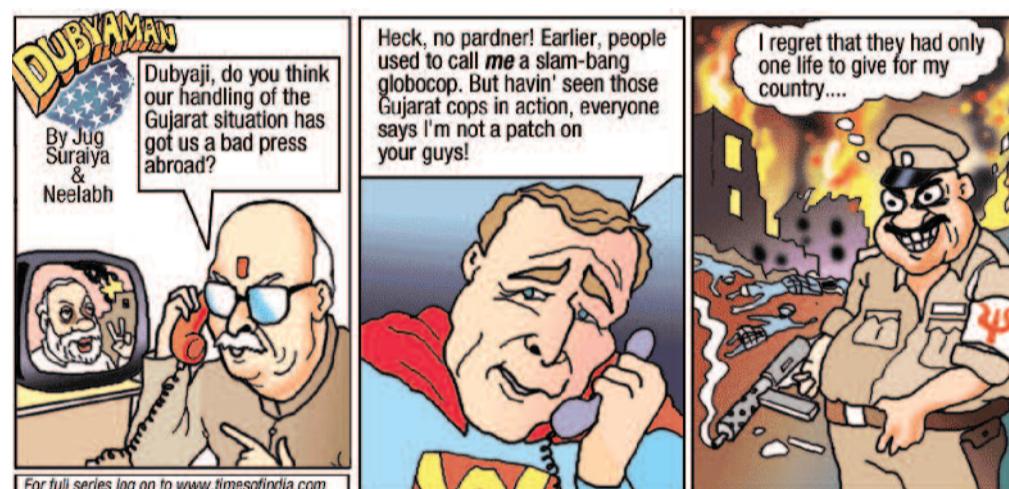
Sufi fables, the enigmatic koans of Zen Buddhism, the impudent escapades of Nand Gopal or the homespun parables of Ramakrishna.

This playful aspect of religion has found intriguing echoes in the world of post-Newtonian physics. God does not play dice with the Universe, pronounced Einstein, to which his friend and fellow physicist, Niels Bohr, replied: Will you please stop telling God what to do?

And if quantum theory is to be believed, what God likes to do is to pun with the world. In the ambiguous light of the "new physics", the world is viewed not as a rigidly defined, homogenously organised and well policed state of things but a participative happening, characterised by a cast seemingly borrowed from the theatre of the absurd: subatomic particles like "tachyons" which are assumed to travel faster than light and therefore move backward in time, or "charmed quarks", the ultimate building blocks of the universe, which are not really matter at all but "hypothetical events" which may or may not take place. (The word "quark" has been borrowed, appositely enough, from James Joyce's comic classic *Finnegans Wake*, the title a pun on the quick and the dead.)

Confronted with the question how "real" is "reality," science has adopted an idiom suspiciously similar to that of mysticism – or of comedy. "Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our percepts. What we perceive depends on what we look for. What we look for depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality." Or, as Groucho Marx almost put it: I would not care to join any reality which would have me as a member.

Laughter it seems is serious business, and the more serious things become, the greater is the role of laughter. It is not a reaction to the scheme of things, but an abreaction, an exorcism of the very real fears and anxieties, the animosities and the prejudices which those who silence laughter would have us believe are our inescapable lot. With our backs against the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Genghis Cohn, we can either accept our culpability in the form of the condemned man's blindfold, or wave it away, together with the offer of a last cigarette – the latter on the grounds that smoking is likely to prove injurious to longevity. Laughter is the best revenge – and the final triumph – of civil society.



The magic and madness of Delhi

NANNI SINGH

I have often wondered how cities came into existence. What was the motivation for people of open lands, who lived with the wilderness and nature cycles to think of the reality of 'urban space' and experience.

The City evolved as a habitat we could be safer in, to allow ourselves to explore and express our culture and creativity. To live in the many dimensions of thousands of people, safe from sandstorms and avalanches and snakebite - the wilder bastions of seamless nature and her overwhelming powers.

The creation of the City was about the expression of choice, to contain ourselves in an environment in which we could grow and evolve in a particular way. Humans existed before that for roughly two and a half million years as hunter-gatherers, a phase that ended before the climax of the last Ice Age.

The first city walls were erected no more than ten thousand years ago, and here we are today, sitting in the lap of one of the greatest cities of all time – a city that began as the famous Indraprastha of the Mahabharata, archeologically dated at 3rd BC to 5th AD, and is today New Delhi.

Delhi has known herself in many guises, in much glory and bloodshed. She has been Lal kot or Mehrauli in the 9th century, Qutub -shahar in the 12th century, Siri in the 13th century, Tughlakabad in the 14th, Jahanpanah which brought together three existing cities, Firozabad in the late 14th, Shahjahanabad in 1632, and since then, Delhi and New Delhi.

The word 'Delhi' comes from the Turkish 'Dilli', which means loose sand, on which one can't peg a tent. The reference is to the 'reti' on the banks of the Yamuna and has strangely been a prophetic name; it also means 'threshold', a place of transience and passage. The word is sometimes interpreted as 'of the heart'.

Dilli has been mother and magician, child and teacher, lover and beloved – to poets and kings, writers and sufis, musicians and craft-makers, glorious trees and spell binding streets, temples and mosques, gurudwaras and churches. To birds and butterflies, fruit and flowers.

She has been the deep womb of fire, of battle and conflict, deceit and rioting. She is the great mystery, cloaked in different ages, languages, peoples, cultures, thinkers, mavericks, religions, artists and mystics, ashrams and dargahs and of various traditions: the literature and poetry of Nizammudin and Amir Khusar, Hazrat inayat khan, Ghalib, Mir: the architecture of the indo-turkish period, the persian, the havelis, baolis, forts, mosques, Lutyens and Baker. She has been and is the heart of the nation's political power.

She is the celebration of festivities of spirit and seasons: Id and Holi, fasting, fireworks and candle-light. She is the keeper of time - her seasons console, exhilarate, infuriate and inspire...she is the heart of every molten summer.

She is the passionate thunderstorm and rain shower of the monsoon. She is autumn, she is the icy chill of winter. She is the howling wind, the mud, the dust that settles on the bones of our beings. She is the magic of a slowly unfolding spring, a flowering of her true nature....

She is the great river Yamuna that begins its journey from a faraway place and carries treasures through her. She is the great Ridge forest that creates her life-breath. She is the beauty of the peacock, parrot and sunbird; the song of the koel, bulbul and mayna, the power of vulture and eagle; she is duck, sparrow and pigeon. She is flamingo.

She is a healer and giver of shade. She is the glorious gulmohar tree, the seductive summer jasmine; she is the aam and amaltas, the Arjuna and Ashoka; she is the bargat and champa. The sour imli and keekar; she is the Maulshree and neem; the peepul and shah-toot; she is the sheesham, the sehmal...she is the great banyan.

She is of which fruit and flower is born - she is the hollyhock and chrysanthmum, the poppy and viola; the amaranthus, sweet pea; watermelon, mango and jamun. She is the Djinn that weaves the boundless bougainvillea and harhsingara....

She is nurturer of people, of our infants and children, of our young people and aging parents. She is the sustenance of our friends and lovers, strangers we pass on the street,

the multitudes who have no homes.

She is the medium through which we may discover and experience ourselves; aiding both our highest potential and our most deadening destruction. She is witness of our ruthlessness – she watches as the river turns to sewer; as the Delhi ridge forest loses its breath; as trees choke to death by roadsides; as the air that carried her fragrance and life turns sulphurous and poisonous. She listens as we complain and criticise. We ourselves have brought her to this state. She receives as we brutalise her most precious resources.

She may be silent but she knows.

She is the keeper of our souls.

What in the city nourishes the spirit? What in the spirit nourishes the city? I have wondered about these connections being two-way. I have questioned the source of our city slowly crumbling under the compulsions of mounting traffic, dying trees, a lifeless, ignored river, a dying forest. Could this be an entirely external phenomenon or is it somehow connected with the state of our inner ecology – our inner relationship with ourselves and our essential elements. Could the state of the outer visible world be an extension of the invisible inner?

Is there a deep-seated discontent that is the premise of our essential relationship with the elements of our outer world and relationships with other humans?

The city and indeed nature are both powerful channels through which we may know ourselves and express who we are. They both enable us to grow and evolve or become dysfunctional, violent and regressive. While Nature provides the perfect source of beauty, harmony, power and wonder, the city is the source of community, culture, livelihood and creativity.

Or are they?

I would like to suggest that they are all these things but that the only way for us to derive growth and experience is through an intense engagement with both. Both are fertile ground for us to express ourselves as either sensitive participants or as people who have little to contribute.

The level of our relationship with our environment, our city is the reflection of our expression of ourselves, of who we are.

As the world around us is a mirror to the magical diversity of life, so is our choice to be. In the context of our city we make choices every moment: We could stop to help a pedestrian cross the street, we could help start a community campaign on safe public transport, we could take a stand for people whose homes are brutally demolished, we could add our voices to others who are struggling for survival, we could help our river live again, we could lead simpler lives, we could consume less, we could be kind to an injured stray dog, we could write and paint and make music and sculpture and drama and photo and mural and song about something that inspires us or is a concern.

We could help create perspective, we could help break myths; we could ask more questions. We could enquire more incisively into the heart of things passed down to us. We could generate peace.

We could celebrate the magic and madness of life. We could pour ourselves into new friendships. We could unearth and reconnect with our history. We could create a deeper listening to others; a deeper seeing.

We could bring to all our choices a quality of reverence; an awareness of the impact that we as individuals have on our fellow beings and nature – both if we choose to be self-expressed or silent; creative or disengaged.

We could choose this way or that – and in all these choices will lie the experience and creation of our 'self' – and who we are being. Within the expression of my choices and pursuits is the creation and power of my life.

That is my experience of being alive.

That is the journey of my self.



What in the city nourishes the spirit? What in the spirit nourishes the city? I have wondered about these connections being two-way. I have questioned the source of our city slowly crumbling under the compulsions of mounting traffic, dying trees, a lifeless, ignored river, a dying forest.

So, where should we hide our less clever children?

KABIR MUSTAFI

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

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

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

So what should we conclude from this?

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

And what are these myths?

That "everyone" wants to make it to IIT.

That if you do get in your life is made.

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

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

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

That without the right credentials life is pretty hopeless.

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

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

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

That the best route is the competitive exam.

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

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

That colleges down grade ICSE/ISC marks.

And how may these myths be challenged?

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

And what may the challenge state?

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

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

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

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

That to have what it takes means a varied intellect embellished by skills and ability, the skill to read, understand, interpret and deduce. The ability to transfer learning to differing situations and to think creatively, not only for art and aesthetics but for products, solutions and answers, for day-to-day situations and the human circumstances and the bizarre strangeness of individual situations.

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

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

That in order for such training to prevail, a school has to make provisions for facilities that will promote and provide opportunities for breadth, depth, the conjunction of scientific enquiry with literary and aesthetic criticism as well as for a spirit of adventure. The best counter for human arrogance is the humility that Nature dictates and the bigness of a man is seen when he knows what it means to be small.

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

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

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

That the CBSE is also striving towards flexibility and empowerment of the students but the efforts of both these and other progressive state boards are hampered by the confining dictates of the schools themselves.

We flout norms, defy systems and ignore instructions. Principals overrule supervising examiners in the conduct of examinations and encourage dishonesty. In contravention of Supreme Court directives, they refuse to take back low grade pass candidates, they "weed out" weak students after "selection" tests and put up as perfect a class for the board examination as their conscience will allow.

Examiners disclose evaluation and confidential marks and paper-setters take tuition and tutors prefer not to teach in class.

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

Are we trying to hide away our less able children? Do we prefer not to acknowledge them

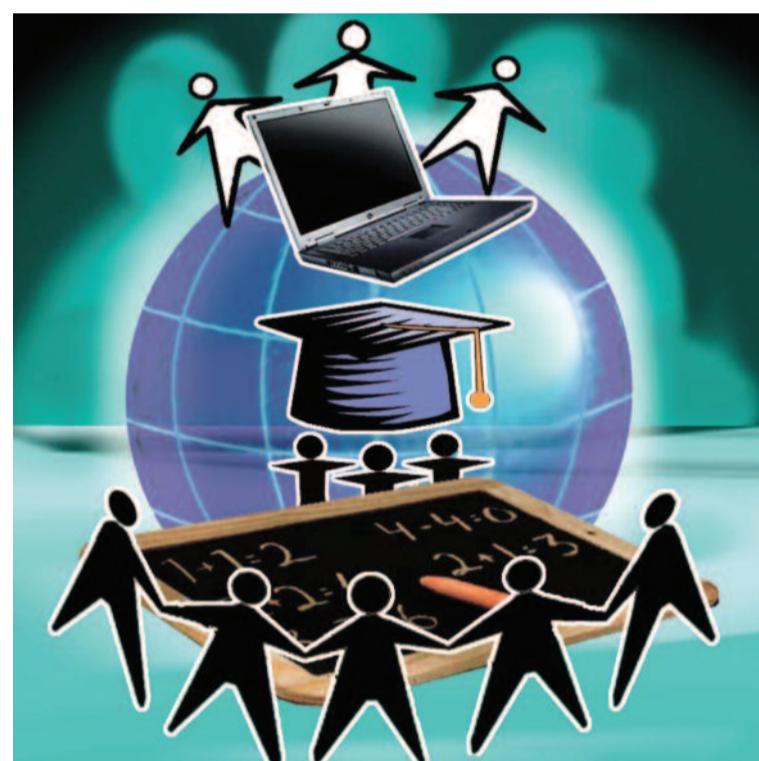
because they are an embarrassment? Or are we ashamed that we are not doing enough for them and don't know how to go about correcting this without losing our image of success?

All too often we sneer at the Government schools, think of them as a bad joke, appalled by stories and sights of neglect.

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

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

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



For as many students as who want to get into IIT, about five times that number have no wish to... even if you do get in, your life will be made only if you are bright, creative, multiskilled.

Indian civil services are a shaky instrument for justice

HARSH MANDER

HALF a century after India shed its colonial shackles, it continues to retain a peculiarly hybrid bureaucratic framework that is in many ways essentially incongruous in a democracy. On the one hand, it holds on to many of its colonial trappings, and public servants who are not elected exercise enormous unaccountable power over several aspects of the lives of ordinary people, both at the local level and in the framing of policy and law.

But, at the same time, during the decades that the state in India assumed leadership of nation-building and social justice, this same bureaucracy was charged with combating poverty and protecting the rights of dalit and tribal people, minorities, women and the working classes. It is this that attracted many of us to the civil services. I spent twenty of the best years of my life in the Indian Administrative Service, living with my family in remote, mostly tribal, districts of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and I do not regret a single day.

My most memorable years were spent working with tribal and dalit communities, peasants and rural workers, people with leprosy, homeless people, rickshaw pullers, manual scavengers, undertrials in jails, children in institutions, and so many other of the most excluded and vulnerable segments of our people.

No other employment could have enabled me to see and learn so much from the resilience, struggles and humanism of people in distant corners of my land. Like many colleagues I found enormous opportunities to implement my beliefs about land-reforms, laws and programmes for tribal and dalit equity, communal justice and programmes to combat poverty as well as to fight corruption. There certainly were personal costs, but there was also substantial support both within and outside the system, as well as enormous democratic spaces for dissent and conscience within the civil services.

And yet, even as I worked with the opportunities that the system afforded, I could see from the start its fatal flaws and rapid corrosion as a democratic institution. It recruited many of the country's better talents, but did little to make them genuinely accountable to the people they were mandated to serve. A spirit of abject, sometimes humiliating subservience, set in as civil servants habitually obeyed without protest even illegal and unjust directions of political superiors. But to the real masters in a democracy, the ordinary citizen, civil servants frequently acted as remote, inaccessible, corrupt and arbitrary rulers.

A common sight in most government offices is of bewildered, harassed and frequently frightened citizens clustered in courtyards, buffeted from desk to desk, subjected to abuse and humiliation, powerless to secure their rights from public servants. Even when people organise themselves to secure their rights, public servants often are intolerant and repressive of democratic struggles and movements.

The rot has deepened in the civil services during the last two decades, primarily due to two trends. The first has been grave setbacks to the socialist ideal, amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rubble of the Berlin wall. With the ascendancy of neo-liberal policies of structural adjustment promoted by the World Bank, belief in state responsibility for the welfare and equitable development of its disadvantaged citizens, has considerably weakened. As a result, civil servants have felt substantially freed from erstwhile responsibilities to plan and implement laws and programmes for redistributive growth and social justice. The civil service today remains bloated and powerful, but feels

even less responsible than in the past to serve its people.

There are innumerable outcomes of this. Just one is the persistence of desperate hunger and pervasive malnutrition at a time when the country has more than three times the maximum buffer stock of food grains rotting in its godowns.

The failure to resolutely reach this food to the hungry millions is not just of the political leadership, but of the higher civil services of India. It is reflected also in the virtual demise of the implementation of land reforms laws, reduced social sector spending, the crumbling of primary institutions of education and health care, abject urban homelessness, and burgeoning corruption at higher levels of the civil services.

The other paramount national trend that has undermined the civil services in recent decades, has been the systematic and pervasive communalisation of the Indian polity.

The anti-Sikh massacre of 1984 marked a watershed in this decline, as civil servants across the consented to enable the brutal slaughter of a segment of the people. The precipitous collapse that followed, with blood-drenched landmarks like the Bhagalpur riots of 1989, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Bombay and Bhopal riots, and the culmination in the Gujarat carnage of 2002. Not only did civil servants openly abet a state-sponsored massacre, but they also for the first time in Independent India, were party to the subversion of all civilised norms of relief and rehabilitation.

For the first time since Independence, the state government refused to set up relief camps, forced even the closure of relief camps established by a terrified and battered community, and refused to assist devastated survivors to rebuild their homes and livelihoods. To me, this is the most shameful moment in the history of the civil services, apart from their submission to the illegalities and excesses of the Emergency.

If I still see hope in the civil services, it is in the resilience of the idealism of some of its young members, with several of whom I developed deep bonds during my tenure on the faculty of the national civil service academy in Mussoorie.

Among these are the young police officers who defied their superiors to bravely protect minorities during the Gujarat carnage, an officer who fearlessly moves without security to serve his people in rural Manipur or another in the violent Naxalite-affected forests of Malkangiri, a district officer who strengthens gram sabhas in Maharashtra, another who extends the right to information in rural Orissa to enable people to fight corruption, and the humanity of a district officer who secures some justice for the dispossessed Musahar community in East UP.

There are many such unsung young men and women of humanity and resolute character that I encounter in the civil services even today, which fills me with pride.

However, in the end, the answer is not in such stray luminous examples, but in the establishment of fully democratically elected governments at the district and local levels.

Even more important is the strengthening of people's movements and left and democratic struggles, for the rights of workers and peasants, for the right to information, the right to food and work, the rights to education, health and shelter, combating globalisation, and ultimately the right to democratic struggles and to a life of dignity and equality.

It lies in the end in defending the sovereignty of the ultimate masters of this land, who are its people.



Even as I worked with the opportunities that the system afforded, I could see from the start its fatal flaws and rapid corrosion as a democratic institution. It recruited many of the country's better talents, but did little to make them genuinely accountable to the people... civil servants habitually obeyed without protest even illegal and unjust directions of political superiors.