

19/12/08

Without a future

Movement to end child labour

by Usha Rai

THE Mumbai terror attack and the discussions on it in Parliament when it opened for the winter session drowned another kind of tyranny that is keeping a staggering 12.6 million children in our country, some of them as young as five and six years, shackled to child labour. India has the dubious distinction of having the largest number of child workers in the world. So some 1,500 people, including NGOs, MPs, MLAs, bureaucrats, sarpanches heading village education committees, corporates, trade union representatives, educationists as well as children who have been pulled out of the labour force, got together in the Capital to work out their agenda for getting every child into school.

Spearheading the movement for "Abolition of child labour and right to education" were the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), UNICEF and the ILO.

It was one of the biggest national conventions of its kind and came at the end of eight state consultations on providing dignity and freedom to children by ensuring their education.

In fact, the very strong statement that went out was that every child who is not in school is a child worker.

But the terror of the moment kept the media from giving due attention to the larger terror that millions of children face every day of their lives working not just in hazardous industries but even as domestic help in homes where even 60 years after our Independence they continue to be treated as slaves and are beaten.

The British have left India but the *baba log* culture prevails with the less privileged children carrying school bags of the more fortunate *babas*.

In fact, what is hazardous is to be out of the protective environment of school. An estimated 75 million children neither go to school nor to work. They are domestic

child workers, street children, migrants and are called "no where children."

The strong anti-child labour sentiments that echoed through two days of deliberations led to an assurance at the conference by Minister for Women and Child Development, Renuka Chowdhury that the distinction between hazardous and non-hazardous jobs would cease.

It was also an epoch-making convention because it was unanimously agreed that all those below 18 years should be categorised as children. So far different policies in the country have variously defined "children" as those below 14, 16 or 18.

The demand for equity and quality in education was voiced by children from

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across the country. The lack of high schools in villages, adequate number of teachers (in Orissa 40,000 posts of teacher need to be filled) and basic facilities like school furniture, drinking water and toilets was raised.

Voicing concern for their less fortunate brethren, representatives of 200 children at the conference pointed out, "What is our future without education? Who will employ us?"

Ending child labour and getting every child into school should be "non-negotiable." There should be no dithering on these two issues which are interlinked.

While Renuka Chowdhury went all out to endorse the demand and even announced that her ministry would come out with a logo that could be put on products that did not employ children, the Minister of State for Labour and the Minister for Rural Development, Oscar Fernandes and Raghuvansh Prasad, skirted the issue of ending child labour.

It is not really possible to end child

labour without ending poverty was their excuse at the conference and there was a chorus of protests. It is, in fact, child labour which is shackling children to a life of poverty, retorted NGOs.

The eight national commissions too, including those representing the minorities, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes as well as the safai karamcharies issued a joint statement that they wanted total abolition of child labour whether rendered for an employer, middleman or one's own family up to the age of 18.

There is an explosive demand for education among the poor today. Parents, even among the poorest, are not only capable of sending their children to formal day schools but are willing to do so.

This has been amply demonstrated in Andhra Pradesh, where thanks to the pioneering work of the MV Foundation, 1,500 villages have been declared free of child labour.

Every child in these villages goes to school, the village panchayat monitors their attendance and the parents are proud of their children. In fact, the parents of these erstwhile child labourers are making enormous sacrifices to see that education of their children is not disrupted until they finish at least class 10.

They talk with pride about the transformation of their child from a child labourer to a student.

As against the parental demand for education, there is the more powerful force of the market that prefers child labour because it is a source of cheap labour. Children can be forced to work for long hours in sub-human conditions of work.

Their exploitation goes unseen under the garb of 'charity' as if the employer was doing a favour to the child in employing and keeping him or her alive.

NGOs working for children, point out that such exploitation goes unabated because there is no shock or outrage in society that children are at work and not in school. The tolerance of child labour is so pervasive that it gets internalised by parents too.

An epidemic on wheels

by Norman Y. Mineta

LAST year, 965 people lost their lives in air crashes around the world. But more than 3,000 people will die on the world's highways TODAY. More than 1.2 million people die each year from road traffic injuries, a toll comparable to the number of people killed by malaria or tuberculosis. For every death there are at least 20 serious injuries. This is an epidemic in every sense of the word.

Yet it is a hidden epidemic. It doesn't make the news because these deaths occur one or two at a time; because nine out of 10 fatalities occur in the developing world; and because in many countries we don't have accurate statistics to measure the problem.

But mostly it doesn't make the news because we are numbed by a sense of fatalism, by a feeling that these are just accidents, unpredictable and unpreventable; we see them as a fact of life, an accepted side effect of our modern mobility.

As a result, highway safety rarely appears on the agendas of international meetings. Many governments and public authorities in the developing world are desperate for assistance to deal with rapidly rising death tolls on their roads, but they find little organized response.

This can begin to change. The UN General Assembly is set to vote on Monday on a plan to hold the first-ever global ministerial conference on road safety. If approved, it will be a major step toward raising the political profile of this epidemic and providing the action needed by governments worldwide to reduce traffic-related deaths and injuries.

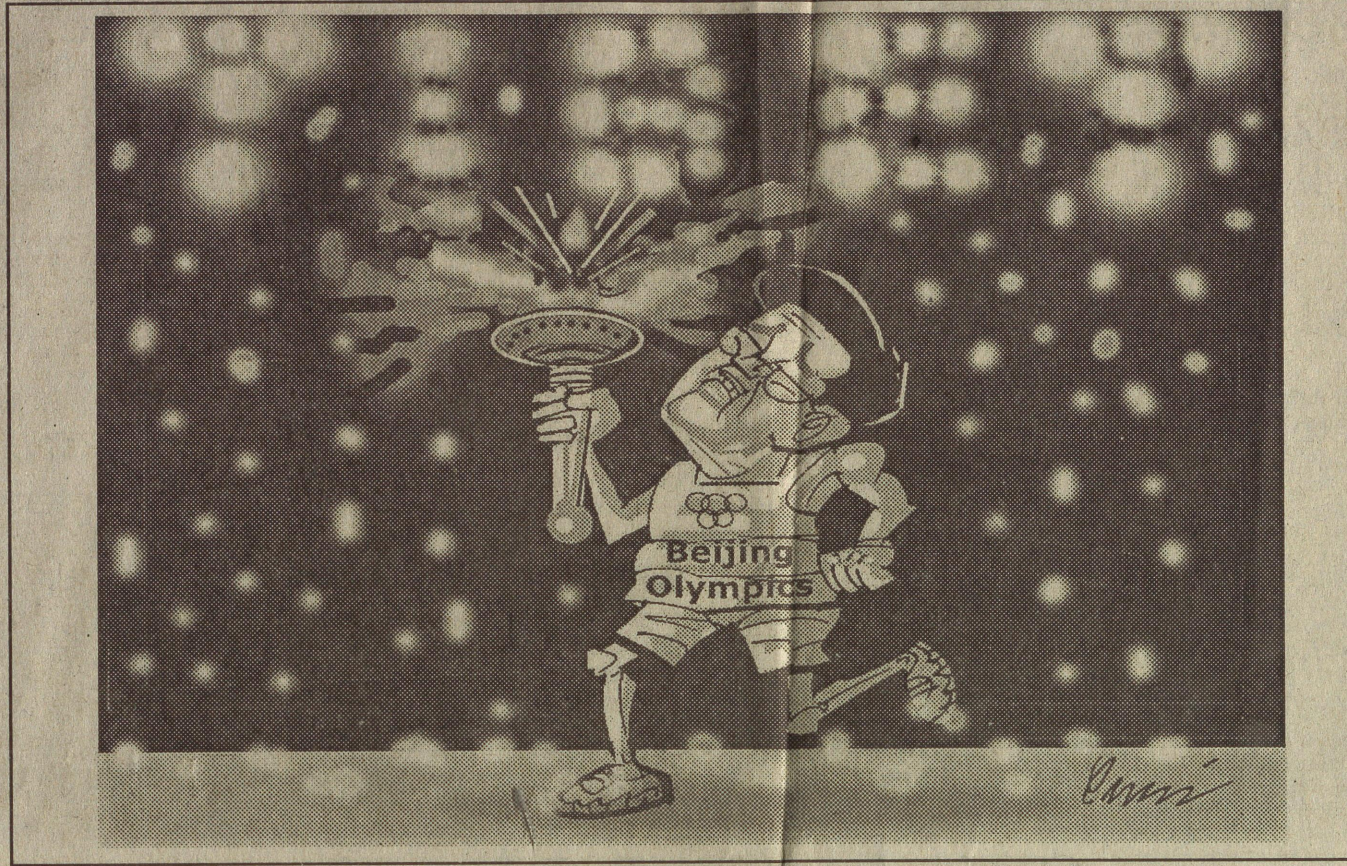
There is no time to lose. Without sustained action, road deaths in some developing countries, such as India, are projected to climb through the middle of the century. It took the United States about 40 years to reverse a trend of increasing traffic deaths.

It took time for us to build safer roads and require safer cars, and for safer behavior to evolve on the part of drivers and other road users. We are still losing 43,000 lives in the United States every year, but we have learned many painful lessons.

The best-performing nations in terms of highway safety, such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Australia, are adopting a "safe systems" approach that is similar to the philosophy governing aviation safety. These nations are showing that road deaths are preventable through sustained political commitment to the use of seat belts and motorcycle helmets, to curbing speeding and drunk driving, and to investment in safer road and vehicle designs. It is an approach that can be applied in any country, rich or poor.

We must share what we have learned. The gap in road safety between developed countries and transitional countries is widening. If current trends continue and we leave developing nations to turn this around by themselves, as many as 100 million lives worldwide could be lost to road injuries before this epidemic begins to reverse course. Countries struggling to meet the U.N. Millennium Development Goals cannot afford the losses in human and economic potential that these deaths represent, especially when the means to stop this disaster are at hand.

By arrangement with
LA Times-Washington Post



Displaced humanity

Chhatisgarh's tribal children struggle for a new life

by Usha Rai

AFACT finding team of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights to Dantewada in Chhatisgarh, affected by civil unrest, and Khammam District in Andhra Pradesh, where some of the 30,000 tribals displaced from Chhatisgarh, are living, has expressed concern about the health, nutrition and education of the displaced children. Tomorrow on Thursday, the Commission is holding a follow up meeting in Delhi with the concerned secretaries of the two state governments.

Dr Shantha Sinha, chairperson of the NCPCR, Dr. J.M. Lyngdoh, former Chief Election Commissioner and Mr. R. Venkat Reddy of the MV Foundation, Hyderabad, travelled through the two districts from December 17 to 19 last year for an assessment of the status of those displaced by the conflict between the Naxals and Salwa Judum.

Dr Sinha has written to the chief secretaries of both States about the team's findings and various steps that should be taken to ameliorate their lot. The displaced tribals of Chhatisgarh are also living in Adilabad, Warangal and East Godavari.

The Commission recommended that public distribution system ration cards should be given to all the displaced people living in Andhra Pradesh. Adults should also be given job cards, so that they can apply for work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

The children from Chhatisgarh, Mrs Sinha has pointed out, are not getting admission to schools in Andhra because they did not have school-leaving certificates and they cannot comprehend Telugu, the language of instruction in Andhra.

The Commission recommends that all displaced children, now in Andhra, must be given admission in schools at the earliest. Dropouts have to be given education and arrangements made in residential bridge courses to reintegrate them into formal schools.

During the visit to the Dantewada region, the team was struck by the enor-

mous tragedies of the tribals and their families. "This is indeed unfortunate. We strongly feel that the State has an obligation to extricate them from the unusual circumstances they have been caught in and ensure their security and fundamental human rights," says Dr Sinha.

"With conscious effort for protecting children and their rights there is hope of harmonising society. Giving every child an access to education up to class ten and investing in providing all that is necessary to make education happen can ensure a secure freedom for these children and their families and even deepen democracy," the team has pointed out.

The NCPCR has identified core areas of concern, which require comprehensive strategies and time bound implementation plans to address the impact of violence, deprivation and disruption on the lives and rights of children and their families

Schools should be identified as 'zones of peace'

affected by conflict in the region.

The NCPCR team has recommended the establishment of Child Rights Cells in the offices of the Dantewada and Khammam District Collectors with members from the community, officials and non-officials. It has offered to facilitate the training of functionaries of institutions dealing with children. All those running schools, hostels, ashram shalas, anganwadi centres will be educated on child rights issues. Recognising the special role of police in protecting child rights, the NCPCR has also offered to train SPO volunteers on child rights.

At the Block and District level the team has recommended social audit of children's rights by trained people.

The NCPCR committee has also sought inter-state collaboration for protecting the entitlements and rights of displaced children and families on a priority basis. It has suggested that on the basis of a survey a register be maintained of the fami-

lies who have shifted to Andhra. This data should be shared by the state governments to ensure basic social services to the families.

On education both governments have been asked to collaborate to ensure education for children who have fled from Chhatisgarh. This includes issuing transfer certificates and other documents to children who have dropped out of schools; assistance for readmission into the new schools, supply of Hindi textbooks and deputation of Hindi-speaking school teachers to Andhra Pradesh to enable integration of these children into their new schools.

Schools, the Committee has said, should be identified as 'zones of peace.' This means schools cannot be used for anything else but education. They have to be kept separate from the camps and programmes introduced for the psychosocial needs of the children.

Planning for re-building of disrupted education and health services/infrastructure affecting children in camps and villages, the fact finding committee has sought a rapid assessment of food security and child malnutrition levels in camps and villages along with provision of meals through schools and anganwadis.

Concerned about the near invisibility of adolescent children, the committee has requested gender based data on camps and schools, ashram schools, residential schools, hostels etc.

The NCPCR committee has also called for adherence to the UNHRC guiding principles in cases of internal displacement, in particular principle 13 that prohibits recruitment of children in armed forces and participation in hostilities. It has also referred to principle 23 of the guidelines that emphasize the right of displaced children to education.

Equally important, it has said are the principles regarding their right to be informed about their missing relatives and re-unification with dispersed family members.

Internally displaced persons should also be protected from forcible return to re-settlement in any place which places their life, liberty, safety, health etc at risk, the UN has said.

Inside Pakistan

by Syed Nooruzzaman

A new odyssey

Most commentators have appreciated Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gillani's understanding of the problems facing Pakistan. His odyssey is not only historic but also full of challenges. He has been offered support eve by the Opposition, yet it will be a Herculean task for him to come up to people's expectations.

As *Business Recorder* said, he has "set the ball rolling for a post-military rule ... Given that the Opposition appears sympathetic and the public at large fully conscious of the fact that the crises he faces are not of his making, he would have a smooth sailing, at least in the first year or so. What he talked about on Saturday was more by way of giving hope to a demoralised people than grappling with the reality of the situation."

He has to tread cautiously. Populism or offering quick solutions for Pakistan's numerous problems will not do.

The *Frontier Post* has taken him to task for scrapping the Frontier Crimes Regulation without offering a credible alternative to bring about order in the tribal region, where people have been experiencing chaos for a long time. In the opinion of the Left-leaning daily, "the Prime Minister's agenda, as it exists now, is (full of) at best half-baked ideas, needing a lot of meticulous thinking to firm up into workable and result-oriented plans and schemes. Presently, it is strikingly more of populism, in which, incidentally, the food-inflation-afflicted citizenry found no place at all, leave aside the new administration's anti-terrorism strategy, which barely got a short-shrift in his announcement."

'No' to finance portfolio

"There is a lot that needs to be done on an urgent basis to set some of the political and administrative wrongs right, not the least of which is the lingering case of the judiciary, but of equal importance to the public will be measures aimed at giving economic relief and setting the tone for recovery in the months ahead."

These comments made by *Dawn* in an editorial on March 30 should be seen against the backdrop of the reality that Pakistan's economy is passing through a very difficult period. It will not be an easy task to meet people's expectations, as they are not only suffering from skyrocketing prices but also an acute shortage of essential items like atta. That is why the PPP has shown little interest in the finance portfolio, which

has gone to the PML (N).

As *Daily Times* commented, "The mainstream parties, the PPP and the PML-N, have found it easy to give the finance plus trade ministry to the PML-N's Mr Ishaq Dar. It doesn't need much detailed analysis to understand why the choice has been made although in normal circumstances the Prime Minister would have preferred to give the ministry to someone from his own party."

The first speculation is that the PPP wants to share the responsibility of correcting the dangerously listing ship of the national economy. It doesn't want to be the lone target of public anger in the coming days when miracles of restoration are not produced."

It is a different matter that the finance portfolio will help the PML (N) to consolidate its base in Punjab, where it has its own government. Punjab needs liberal flow of funds which would have been difficult to manage had the portfolio been with some other party.

Plight of women

Pakistan's parliament (National Assembly) has a unique position. No other House of the people in the world has as much representation of women as in this country. They occupy 74 of the 342 seats in the Assembly, including that of the Speaker. But women in general are leading a wretched life in different parts of Pakistan, particularly in the tribal areas.

As *The News* commented, "Pakistan may have a female Speaker of parliament but this surely doesn't mean that there is not a lot that needs to be done if women are to be seen as equals by society and treated as equals under the law. While these achievements are more than welcome, a paper published recently by a Peshawar-based female academic reveals how women in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) might as well live on another planet (which is effectively what they do), a planet that is not even orbiting the same star as Madam Speaker."

They have never participated in elections. In fact, they have nothing to do with what happens elsewhere in the world. There is a Ministry for Women Development and NGOs like Rozan are working for their emancipation, but the situation remains unchanged. Women are also the biggest sufferers of unending terrorist violence.

According to *Dawn* (March 30), "Many among our women have led defenceless lives without a context—a sad fault of social mores that have governed their right to choice and freedom."

ADOPTION PROGRAMME

Haryana State Council for Child Welfare has available one female child D.O.B. 10.7.2007. The child is suffering from delayed milestone. Couples below 45 years, who desires to adopt the above mentioned child may contact Haryana State Council for Child Welfare, 650, 16-D, Chandigarh for further details Ph. No. 2770393, 2543453.

Khadi & Village Industries Commission
103-A, The Mall, Ambala Cantt
Phone / telefax : 2643688, Email : kvicamb@rediffmail.com

NOTIFICATION

It is informed to all concerned that PMEGP (Prime Minister Employment Generation Programme) in place of REGP (Rural Employment Generation Programme). All the concerned agencies are advised to ensure that no proposal are accepted or sanctioned under REGP w.e.f. 01.04.2008

State Director

SHAURYA ARMY PRE SCHOOL (SAPS), AMRITSAR CANTT

1. Shaurya Army Pre School (SAPS), Amritsar Cantt invites applications for the post of HEADMISTRESS. Educational Qualification - Graduate with B.Ed. and min seven years teaching experience with pre-primary classes and good knowledge of Account, Budgeting and Administration of a school.

2. The last date for application is 15 April 08 and interview is likely to take place on 22 April 08.

3. Only shortlisted candidates will be intimated by post/telephone about the exact date, time and venue for the interview.

Lt. Col/Maj Edn Offr, HQ 15 Army Bde

DIRECTORATE (MARKETING) H.P. STATE FOREST CORPORATION LTD.
Nigam Vihar, Shimla-171002

Corrigendum of Auction Notice

The auction of timber to be held on 26th March, 2008 in respect of Himkashin Sale Depot Bhadrova as notified vide this office Notification No. SFC/MZ/3261-3421 dated 5.12.2007, is hereby re-fixed as below:

Month	HSD Bhadrova
April	16.4.2008 at 10.00 A.M.

For further details, please contact Divisional Manager, HSD Nurpur (Tel.No. 01893-220356)

Director (Marketing)

WESTERN RAILWAY

"CORRIGENDUM TENDER NOTICE"

Sub.: Corrigendum tender notice for Tender No. Dy. CE(C)/665. Ref.: Tender Notice No. G 10/1/3 Dated 28.02.2008. With reference to the above, corrigendum in c/w T.No. Dy. CE(C)/665 is issued as follows: 1. As per directives of Railway Board, clauses in connection with Security deposit, Mobilization Advance and Price variation have been modified in the tender document. Subsequently, a corrigendum tender document has been uploaded on the internet. The prospective tenderer(s) are advised to carefully go through these clauses before quoting their offer. 2. The prospective tenderer(s) can now obtain the modified tender document from the Office of Deputy Chief Engineer (Construction I), Western Railway, 8th Floor Station Building, Churchgate, Mumbai-400 020; on any working day upto the 08.04.2008 upto 12.00 hrs. The tender document will not be sold after 12.00 hrs. 3. Those tenderer(s) who have already downloaded the tender document previously from the internet are advised to download the modified tender document afresh. The tenderer(s) are advised to quote their offer in the modified tender document only; otherwise their offer will not be considered. 4. All other terms and conditions will remain the same. (No. G/10/1/3 Date : 27.03.2008).

NF/M-19

"Dial 139 for any Rail-related enquiry"

WANTED CANTEN MANAGERS FOR HQ PH & HP (I) SUB AREA GOLDEN LION CANTEENS

LOCATED IN HARYANA AT AMBALA, JAGADHRI, PIPLI, KARNAL, KAITHAL, PANIPAT, SONEPAT, FARIDABAD, GOHANA AND IN PUNJAB AT ROPAR & FATEHGARH SAHIB

Wanted retired/retiring Army Officers (Col & below, retiring in next six months) for the post of Managers age not more than 57 years on the date of interview. Pay scale Rs 5500-175-9000 excl. travelling allowance @ Rs 1000/- per month and bonus @ 20% of basic per month. Joining pay Rs 7900/- (approx) (approx rupees seven thousand nine hundred only). Bonus paid on yearly basis. Appointment up to the age of 60 years. EFP and Gratuity applicable as per rules, boarding/lodging under own arrangement. No other allowances admissible. Apply to Canteen Cell, HQ PH & HP (I) Sub Area, Ambala Cantt. by 19 April, 2008 with Bio-data and latest photo. A written test will be conducted on 21 April, 2008 at 1000 hours. Date of interview of selected candidates in written test will be intimated later. No TA/DA will be applicable. Candidates must be willing to work at any of locations given in the advertisement and in other locations falling under this organisation in future.

CORRIGENDUM

Date of sale, acceptance and opening of tenders against Notice inviting Tender No. 340/DH/MM dated 28.02.08 & QD-445 for the rate contract of 33 KV C&R Panels has been extended as under:-

Last date of sale of bidding documents upto 17.00 hrs	09.04.08
Last date of acceptance of tender upto 17.00 hrs	10.04.08
Due date of opening of Part-I tender at 15.00 hrs	11.04.08

All other terms and conditions will remain unchanged. The detailed NIT is available on Nigam's web site www.dhbn.com

Sd/- General Manager/MM for Chief General Manager/MM DHBVN, Hisar.

PRDH 5785

GOVERNMENT OF JAMMU & KASHMIR SHER-I-KASHMIR INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCES SOURA SRINAGAR (J&K STATE) KASHMIR INDIA

NIT 03 (IMPORTS) OF 2008

Subject:- Extension in the last date for sale/receipt of tenders

The last dates for sale/receipt of tenders for supply/ installation of Bio-Medical equipment invited vide NIT 03 (Imports) of 2008 dated February 20, 2008 are hereby extended as per the following schedule:-

Last date for Sale of Detailed NIT	April 12, 2008
Last date for Receipt of tenders	April 14, 2008 upto 1 p.m.
Opening of the Technical Bids	April 15, 2008 at 1 p.m.

The rest of the NIT remains unchanged

Sd/- (Sr. Materials Management Officer) Imports.

No SIMS 324 NIT 03 (Imports) of 2008 Dated March 23, 2008.

ATTENTION GRADUATES

Assistant Central Intelligence Officer Grade II/Executive Examination

(Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India)

No. of Vacancies: 200 (subject to change)

(General - 101, OBC - 54, SC - 30, ST - 15)

Written Examination at 32 Centres located All over India, for application format & other details, Please refer the Employment News dt. 29th March, 2008.

davp 19116/11/0030/0708

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PUBLIC NOTICE

Smt. Kavita S. Kumar JAO O/o GMTD, Jalandhar was charge sheeted vide GMTD Jalandhar Memo No. Disc-48/KS/2007/JL/26 dated 13-12-07 under Rule-36 of BSNL CDA Rules-2006 for unauthorised absence w.e.f. 26-02-2007. The copy of the charge sheet was sent to Smt. Kavita S. Kumar at her last known available addresses vide registered post dated 15-12-2007 & 04-03-2008, which were received back undelivered with the postal authority remarks "Not claimed and addressee left India, so RTs."

It is therefore established that it is not possible to communicate with her through normal course of communication. Through this notice the said Smt. Kavita S. Kumar JAO is afforded an opportunity to appear in the office of GMTD, Jalandhar with in 15 days of the publication of this notice to make her defence, failing which further action will be taken against her as per rules.

General Manager Telecom, Distt. Jalandhar

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Spectrum



Majidi's magic at work
Page 8

Nestling in the Nilgiri hills is a place where religious unity, love and compassion rule the heart of people. **Usha Rai** visits Abu Vishwa Complex near Ooty and shares the vision behind this unique effort

Where faith unites

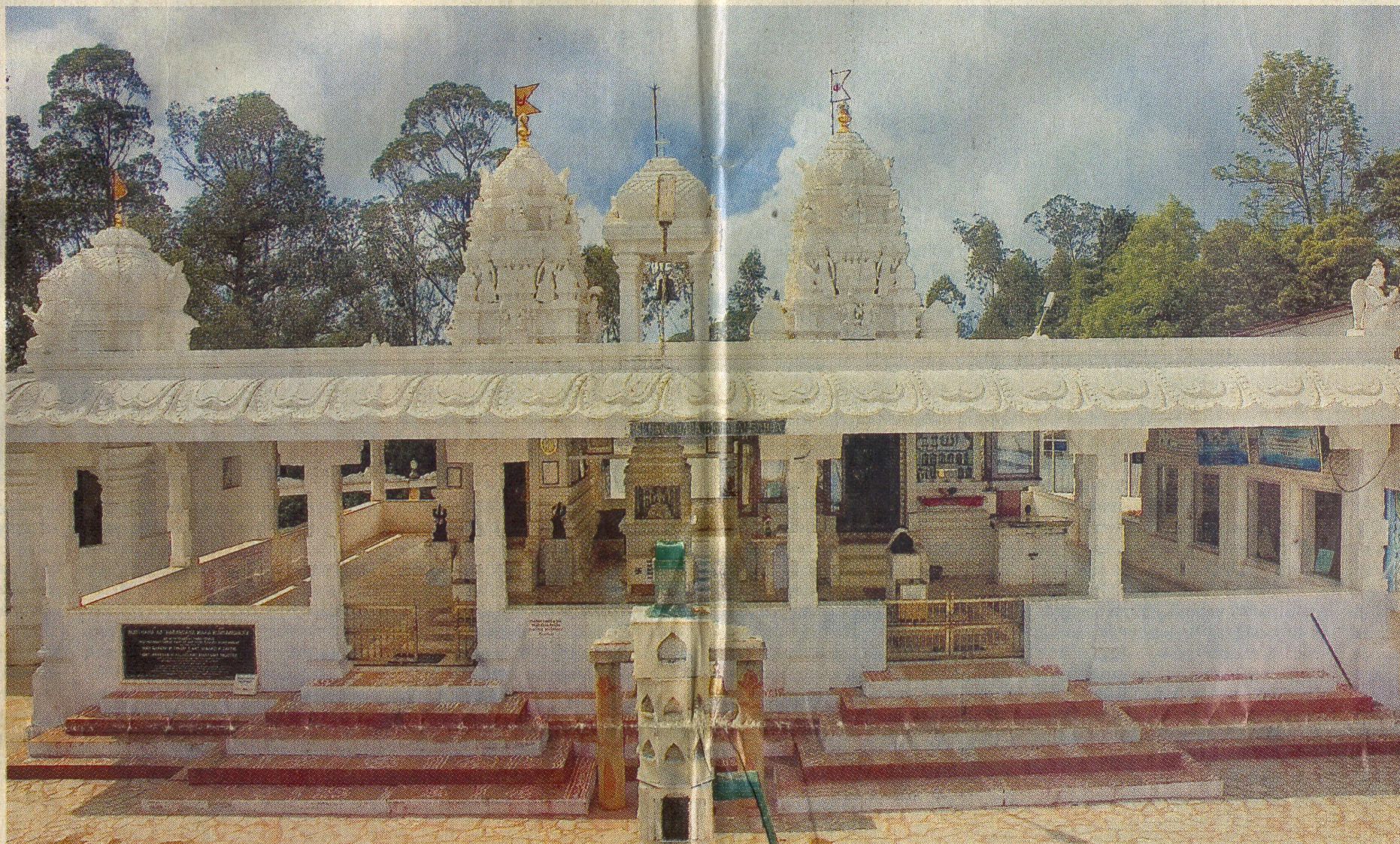
At a time when communal conflicts across the country have led to paroxysms of violence and sullied the name of India, in a serene corner of Ooty (Udhagamandalam), the Abu Baba Religious and Festival Mission Trust has been inculcating respect for all religions. Since poverty seems to be a major cause of conversions, which are leading to conflict, the trust focuses on providing food, education and shelter to the poor and the needy regardless of their caste or religion.

In 2004, on the 100th birth anniversary of Sufi saint Abu Baba, who started the movement for secularism, schoolchildren were invited by the trust to write an essay on the 'Oneness of religion.' More than 240 entries were received and the best 13 were given scholarships of Rs 10,000 each a year to study for as many years as they wanted. Some of these children are now completing their graduate and postgraduate degrees. Under the leadership of the organisation and its current spiritual head — Ramu Baba — they are growing up with an abiding faith in secularism and respect for all religions.

A helping hand

When Abu Baba had established the Sri Abu Babaji Charitable Mission Trust in 1980, scholarships are being given every year to the poor and the academically inclined. Now the number of those receiving scholarships has swelled to 2,500. The number of applicants has been increasing every year. No one is turned away but there is a careful scrutiny of forms to ensure that the deserving are not left out. Some of the earliest scholarship recipients have gone abroad for further studies and a couple of them have become priests.

While practicing in the community what it so ardently preaches, for those seeking spiritual solace it has a get-away — a unique and beautiful peace complex — the Abu Vishwa Temple Complex — spread over five acres in Udhagamandalam. Here people can come to spend some serene moments in communion with their Creator. Hindu gods and goddesses co-exist with Jesus Christ, Christian saints, Jain and Muslim religious symbols. The statue of the Jain spiritual leader Lord Mahavira in the complex is imposing. As many as 800 Jains had taken part in the



The Abu Vishwa multi-religious temple complex
Photos courtesy: Abu Baba Religious and Festival Mission Trust

installation ceremony of the statue. A replica of the Kabah Sharif and the Zoroastrian fire symbol, too, find representation in the pantheon of religions at this spiritual complex. There are several exquisitely crafted tableaux depicting the crucifixion of Christ and the story of Lord Krishna's birth, fight with the demons and his romance with the *gopis* of Vrindavan. Even the placing of these tableaux depicts the similarity of the trials and tribulations that the various manifestations of the Creator had to undergo. A giant statue of Hanuman seems to guard this abode of gods.

Religious harmony

The temple complex overlooks the *mazar* of Abu Baba, who had died in 1988. The *mazar* has exquisite marble carvings. In keeping with his

secular philosophy, four columns on top of the *mazar* are decorated with a Cross (symbolising Christianity), an Om (symbol of Hinduism), a crescent moon with a star in the centre (symbol of Islam) and the Zoroastrian symbol of fire.

Whatever the initial hesitancy there may have been in worshipping together has dissipated over the years. Prayers are performed daily by followers of all faiths. In fact, people can be seen lighting candles at the Lady of Lourdes, at the lower end of the temple complex, then climbing up to offer *namaaz* at the *mazar* of Abu Baba before ringing the bells of the temple, housing idols of several deities. The morning air is permeated with the mellifluous notes of recorded religious songs, played through the music system all over the complex.

The *maulana*, who looks after the *mazar* of Abu Baba, was initially reluctant to even open the temple and church for worship at 5 a.m. Now he can chant mantras from the Hindu scriptures. On Fridays and Sundays, the Bishop or one of the priests of Ooty conducts a Mass. Aarti is performed twice in a day by a Hindu priest and a Jain priest, too, comes everyday for prayers. The *maulana* lights *dhooop* at Baba's *dargah* and reads from the *Koran*.

All religious festivals are observed at the temple complex whether it is the Eid, Diwali or the Christmas. Looking at the congregation one cannot make out their religious moorings. There is bonhomie all around. In fact, there is a peace committee of all religious heads. What better testimony of the secular credentials of this little 'abode of gods' in the hills of the Nilgiris than the fact that the organisation was started by a Muslim, Abu Baba Rahemtullah Allah. He was born in a wealthy family of shipping merchants, but by the age of 21 he gave up all comforts to travel on a soul-searching journey. On getting enlightenment, he spread the message of "Have trust in God and respect all religions."

The Guru

He started working in this area in the Nilgiris and nine years after his death one of his closest disciples Ramesh Zaveri took over the mantle of spiritual leadership. Zaveri, who also belonged to an affluent family of Mumbai jewellers, was ordained to carry forward the spiritual activities as Ramu



Abu Roti where many get their only meal of the day

Baba. Rev Anandrayar, the Bishop of Udhagamandalam, and other religious leaders participated in the installation ceremony of the current head of the trust.

It was to verify an entry in the Limca Book of Records that the writer visited the Abu Vishwa Temple Complex. It was Ramu Baba's birthday and there was hectic activity of cleaning up and organising a Mass, followed by lunch the next day. All his well-wishers and benefactors of the organisation's charity were present. But what was astonishing was a Christian Mass being performed with a huge image of Lord Ganesha in the backdrop.

Christian as well Hindu couples, whose weddings had been solemnised by the trust in February this year, were also present.

The organisation had solemnised the marriages of 61 couples. The mass wedding ceremony was organised to commemorate the 50th wedding anniversary of Ramu Baba and his wife, Vasanthi. The trust has also agreed to provide for the education and care of children, born

to the designated *panchayat ghars* or community centres. With a doctor, nurse, a pharmacist and a clerk, the medical van conducts its rounds five days a week. Medicines are sold at subsidised rates depending on the financial status of the family.

It was on a cold, wet morning that the medical team arrived at Meekeri village, 17 km from Ooty. The 140 families of the village had been given advance information about the arrival of the medical team. The community centre had been opened and cleaned. Even as the clerk set up his clinic and pulled out the medical records of the patients from the village, a flask of steaming Nilgiri coffee arrived in the small stainless steel tumblers for the medical team. New patients were registered for Rs 5.

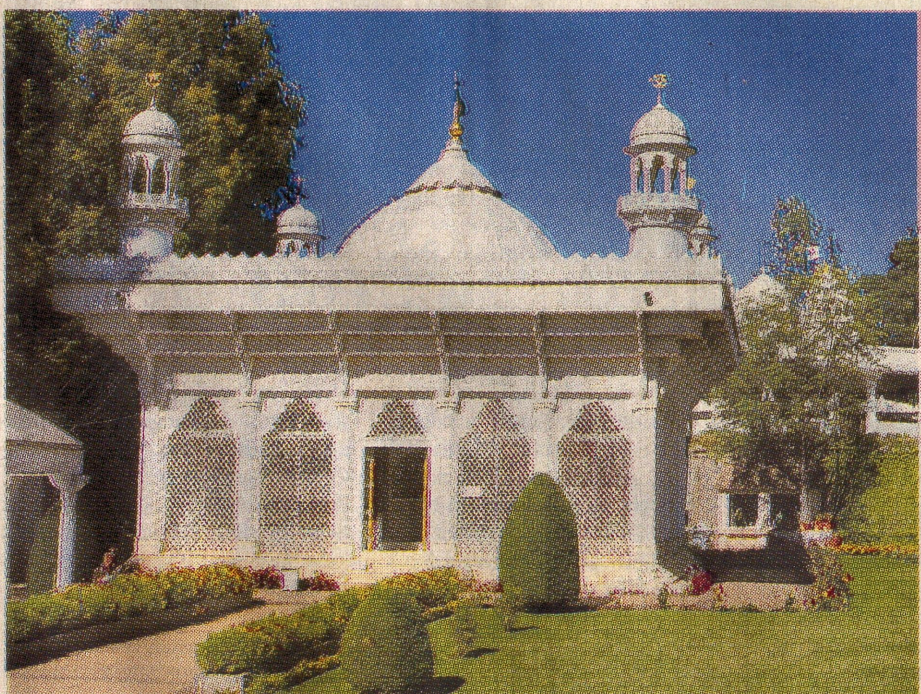
An old woman arrived and collected medicines for her 30-year-old son, suffering from mental illness. Though a missionary health unit also visits the village, the villagers seem to have more confidence in the medicines distributed by the Abu Baba medical unit. By the end of the morning, the medical team had attended to 24 patients.

Crib contest

For the past three years around Christmas a crib competition is organised by the Trust. With a sizeable population of Christians in Ooty, the competition attracts a lot of entries. Last year, 200 homes in the Nilgiris had participated in the competition.

The hillsides resound with the festivity of Christmas and carol singing. Outside homes and hotels the Nativity scene is re-enacted and the cribs are getting bigger and more modern. Hindus and Muslims show their secular credential and put up tableaux on the birth of Jesus. Last year, the first prize was won by a Muslim.

Ramu Baba has been contributing to the setting up of temples, churches and mosques in villages. He plans to construct small residential units for the poor and the needy.



The mazar of Abu Baba where four columns on the top carry symbols of different religious faiths

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Way to healthy delivery

Dais have been an important part of the process of childbirth. However, the trend of institutional deliveries has sidelined them. These traditional midwives can be trained for a role in the national rural health scheme to lower the rate of maternal mortality, writes **Usha Rai**



TRUSTED HANDS: Shanti Devi, a trained dai, examines a woman at a delivery hut in Byana village, 20 km from Karnal, in Haryana

BIJLA is an elderly and experienced dai from Jharkhand. Her eyes, which have seen hundreds of anaemic and malnourished pregnant women and her hands that have delivered their babies, are her tools as well as strength. A little over six months ago a woman who was five months pregnant with her third child showed herself to Bijla. After examining her, Bijla realised that there were certain complications due to which the woman would have to go for a caesarean section delivery. As the hospitals in this district of Jharkhand did not have the facilities for a C-section, she took the woman to the neighbouring West Bengal for delivery when the time came. But as the woman went into labour, there was no doctor around. The attendant on duty failed to observe the complications and went ahead with the procedure for a normal delivery. A terrified Bijla did not rest till she found a doctor, brought him to the delivery room and ensured a safe C-section.

SATSANGI, another dai from Himachal Pradesh, who has been delivering almost all the babies in some 20 villages around her home, has been trained by the NGO Sutra. In fact all dais of the region, she maintains, are trained. She not only delivers babies but has also learnt to administer vaccines. As there is no sub-centre in her area of operation so she plays a critical role in facilitating safe births in the region. Often the dais motivate the pregnant women to visit the sub-centre in the neighbouring panchayats to get their names registered and to get their tetanus shots as well as iron and other supplements that are provided free of cost by the state.

She has learnt to treat women with herbs and roots of local plants and has her own home-brewed cure for diabetes. She has safely delivered conjoined twins and even the baby of a nurse in her neighbourhood.

In the case of women from economically weaker sections, she makes it a point to accompany them to hospitals for delivery so that they can avail of the money given under the Janani Suraksha Yojana (safe motherhood scheme).

Dais and auxiliary nurse midwives are the mainstay of delivery huts like the one at Neval village, 10 km from Karnal. These delivery huts offer a ray of hope to expectant mothers.

Tribune photos: Ravi Kumar

THERE are over 10 lakh dais or traditional birth attendants serving rural and urban communities in the country and for centuries they have been delivering babies in return for a coconut, a sari or sums as small as Rs 50 or 100. According to the National Family Health Survey (2005-2006), an overwhelming proportion of births, especially in the high focus states of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), still take place in homes. Till 2005, when NRHM came into existence, there was constant training and retraining of trained birth assistants (TBAs) and dais to ensure a continuum of care for pregnant women and lactating mothers. The NRHM, however, made the mistake of equating safe delivery with institutional delivery. But it is not as if hospitals or health centers have brought about a revolutionary change. On the contrary health experts have pointed out that now the site of maternal deaths has shifted from homes to medical institutions. Though the concerns of the NRHM are justified as India has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world yet the manner in which it has gone about solving this problem is questionable.

Contradictions

According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) figures released recently, in Uttar Pradesh alone as many as 40,000 pregnant

women die every year. It was in a move to bring down this number that the NRHM focused on institutional deliveries with Rs 1,700 being given to every mother post delivery under the Janani Suraksha Yojana.

The statistics released by the NRHM, however, present a different picture. Dr Abhijit Das, Director of the Centre for Health and Social Justice, points out that figures from Andhra Pradesh show that 93 per cent of the deliveries in February 2008 at the primary health centres (PHC) were normal and 83 per cent of the patients used referral transport provided by the nearest government facility.

But there is another side of this story. The number of nurses in the labour rooms in primary health centres in Andhra Pradesh is as low as 19 per cent and the number of auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) trained as skilled birth attendants (SBA) is 35 per cent.

Uttar Pradesh claimed 99 per cent normal deliveries in its PHCs. This, Dr Das found difficult to accept since the number of trained SBAs present was 4.5 per cent, medical officers available at the PHCs was 1.5 per cent, trained nurses 3.8 per cent and ANMs available 4.5 per cent.

So the question arises — who does the delivery? Is it done by the non-existing doctor or some skilled attendant like the dai.

Janki Bai, a dai from Kargone, Madhya Pradesh, says she had helped in delivering a baby whose head was elongated. Since it was an abnormal delivery, she referred the

case to the hospital but the baby died there and its body was cremated there quickly before the family returned to the village.

Looming threat

The NRHM is in its third year of operation and the TBAs are feeling threatened. Both the ASHA programme and the emphasis on institutional delivery have had an impact on dais and their traditional roles as the midwives of their villages.

Ideally, the dais should have been integrated into the NRHM, as they are deeply respected in their villages. Many of them have shown leadership qualities and have got into village panchayats. This potential should have been tapped to make them service providers and health educators. Some dais have even become ASHAs, but because of their low literacy level very few could make the grade. This has led to a direct conflict with those lucky enough to get into the system.

The dais are generally from the lower castes (removal of placenta etc is seen as dirty work in many states), poor, widowed and often single women but all these are no reflection on their skills. They are a part of the caring and nurturing backdrop of the village and their work is round-the-clock all through the year. It does not begin and end with the birth of a baby.

Recently, dais from different parts of the country gathered in Delhi to seek recognition for their work and a place in the NRHM. They spoke of their concern for the village women.

While claiming that they had nothing against institutional deliveries, they pointed out that many of the primary health centres were not operational, doctors were unavailable and transporting a pregnant woman for an institutional delivery was often a Herculean task.

They cited several instances of women delivering on way to a health facility and the dai being their only hope for a safe delivery in transit.

Government figures indicating 100 per cent round-the-clock functionality of the PHCs in Madhya Pradesh were challenged by Janakibai of Kargone district of MP. She said three of the 10 PHCs in her area were not functioning and none of them remained open 24 hours.

Instead of respecting their contribution, their time-tested skills and knowledge and upgrading their skills and knowledge, there is an attempt to by-pass them in many parts of the country. Worse, they are being blamed for the continuing high maternal mortality in the country though it is a well-known fact that emergency obstetric care is not available in a large part of the country.

Dai sangathan

In Gujarat the Dai Association was established in 2005 by the dais and civil society organisations to increase their visibility, capabilities and to advocate for a more significant role in the public health programme.

The Gujarat government has recognised their role and 8,000 dais and 18 NGOs are associated with the Dai Sangathan. Babiben Parmar, President of the sangathan, in fact spelled out their role in promoting immunisation, tuberculosis and HIV prevention and treatment in addition to facilitating childbirth.

In fact, the sangathan is playing a major role in providing health insurance to rural women.

Despite the large turnout of dais, civil society health professionals and foreign donors for programmes to reduce maternal mortality at the national consultation, the government representation at the meeting was limited to the Assistant Commissioner from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Dr Manisha Malhotra. She, however, did indicate that the NRHM had not disowned the dais. It had left it to the state governments to innovative and integrate dais into health programmes.

However, instead of aping the West, India needs to realise the ground reality and recognise the role of dais. There is a need to find a proper place for them in the NRHM as active partners with ASHAs, ANMs and anganwadi workers. The rich traditional support that the dais provide through counseling, massage, delivery by squatting, traditional medicines and nutrition needs to be documented and recognised.

There is also a need for an accreditation council to train dais and ensure quality service.

