

# A famous war hero's widow languishes in poverty

*On Army Day today, we remember a soldier relegated to the history books*

by Usha Rai

GHAZIPUR, Jan 14 - Company Quarter Master Havaldar Abdul Hamid's great courage in destroying two Patton tanks and damaging a third in the 1965 India-Pakistan war has been immortalised in history books and Army records. His posthumous Param Vir Chakra has inspired two of his sons and eight others in his native village, Dhamupur, to join the Army.

But his widow, Rasoolan Bibi, in her mid-sixties, lives alone in her half-constructed house with not a scrap of furniture in it. A cold wind tears through the open roof and a cat creeps in to drink the milk left uncovered in the kitchen.

If the Army has taken care of the valiant soldier's wife, it is not reflected in her lifestyle. She lives in the shadows of poverty with the memories of a tailor-master with whom she lived a full life till the Army took him away and made him a grenadier.

But this November was memorable for Rasoolan Bibi. For the first time in 30 years, with permission from the Prime Minister, Mr P.V. Narasimha Rao, she visited the grave of her husband with her youngest son, Junedh Alam, who was barely two when his father was killed in action at Assal Uttar. The visit was a tiny news item, buried in the inside pages of a newspaper, and it was meant to coincide with Army Day celebrations.

For Assal Uttra, a village on the India-Pakistan border, Hamid is a saint. The panchayat of Cheema village has donated about two acres of land for a park around the grave, constructed by the 29 Infantry Brigade. "I may never get another opportunity to visit the mazar, but what I saw brought tears to my eyes," says Rasoolan Bibi.

The *mazaar* was made of red and green granite and Abdul Hamid's name has been embazoned in the cold stone.

Rasoolan Bibi will carry the memory of that visit to her grave. It will give her solace in



**FORGOTTEN FAMILY:** Rasoolan Bibi, the widow of Abdul Hamid, at her home. *Express photo by R.K. Dayal.*

her lonely existence. Her five children, four sons and a daughter, have married and moved out

of Dhamupur. Two have retired from the Army and the third is still working in an ordnance

factory in Kanpur. The youngest son, who lives in Dullhapur, runs the branch post office of

Dhamupur from the front room of the house. So Rasoolan Bibi

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**Abdul Hamid**

## Abdul Hamid, a profile in courage

The 4th Grenadier Battalion was holding one of the forward areas in Punjab's crucial Khemkaran sector. As the sun rose on the morning of September 10, Pakistan shells pounded the lines ahead of village Cheema on the Bhikiwind-Khemkaran Road. A tank attack followed and by 9 a.m., the enemy had penetrated the forward

companies.

Determined to halt the Pakistan advance at any cost, Company Quarter Master Havaldar (CQMH) Abdul Hamid of the Grenadiers, forward commander of a recoil-less gun detachment, drove into the thick of battle in a gun-mounted jeep. He knocked out two tanks and, despite a hail of bullets, was targeting a

third when he was cut down by mortar fire.

Inspired by CQMH Abdul Hamid's courage under constant enemy fire and his complete disregard for personal safety, his comrades put up a gallant fight and beat off the assault. CQMH Abdul Hamid was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously.

WEDNESDAY MAY 22 1996

60-year-old Bhagwati Devi has come a long way

# From stone-crushing to Parliament

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, May 21

**B**HAGWATI Devi, 60, (Janata Dal), the only woman elected to the Lok Sabha from Bihar, symbolises the true empowerment of grass-root women. Though without proper training she may not be as effective in Parliament as she is in Gaya, this three-times representative in the Bihar Assembly is a stone crusher who continues to live in her one-room Indira Awas tenement.

Six Lok Sabha constituencies were studied by Women's Study Centres in different Universities and at the Centre for Social Research in Delhi to evaluate the performance of women candidates. However, it is the reserved constituency of Gaya that presents a ray of hope — that women with a strong rural basis can make it to the highest echelons of political empowerment.

The study was commissioned by the National Commission for Women which is working on a Bill for 30 per cent reservation for women in Assemblies and Parliament. The constituencies studied were Madras South, Delhi South, Calcutta South, Ludhiana, Ghaziabad and Gaya.

Though Bhagwati Devi does not hail from a political family

and is too poor to finance her own election, with her socialist background she identified with the rural poor and was called the "daughter of the soil". She travelled through her constituency on foot and spoke about land rights, protection for dalits and the irrigation requirements of the small farmer.

Though not formally educated, she did her campaigning without the support of bigwigs like Laloo Prasad Yadhav. It was her association with Ram Manohar Lohia and Karpoori Thakur that stood her in good stead. Women respondents did not favour women per se in politics. Only a true worker like Bhagwati.

The study analyses why actress Revathi (South Madras), Jaswant Kaur (Ludhiana), wife of the late Punjab chief Minister Beant Singh, and industrialist Rita Singh (Ghaziabad) lost and why Mamta Bannerji and Sushma Swaraj won.

Revathi got deeply interested in care of the handicapped after she acted in the film *Anjali*. She refused tickets from smaller parties and entered the fray knowing how difficult it is for an independent candidate. But without adequate resources she had to reduce her campaign vehicles from four autorickshaws to two.

However, her fate was sealed even before the campaign began because the elite intellectuals of

South Madras had lost faith in film stars like Vyjanthimala and Jayalalitha. Revathi had neither the support of a party cadre nor mahila groups. The winning candidate, T.R. Balu of DMK, had nursed the constituency.

Jaswant Kaur was known as a *katil ka katil* (killer of the killers) because the electorate believed her husband, Beant Singh, had killed militants. Imposed on Ludhiana by Delhi, she lacked the support of local cadres. Even the Mahila Congress workers preferred to go to Udaipur to campaign for Girija Vyas.

Sixty-nine years old, she had to be helped up to the podium, leading to comments "what can she do for us when she cannot carry herself." The study shows that Jaswant Kaur did not speak at all. Though this was put to her being in mourning, the study shows her total failure at public speaking.

Industrialist Rita Singh (Congress) who lost from Ghaziabad had management and defence professionals backing her. She jetted around and used electronic gadgets in true corporate style. But there was very little support from traditional Congressmen. In fact B.P. Maurya, wanted the Ghaziabad ticket for his niece. Rita Singh stayed in four star hotels and her promise to bring affluence, which she enjoyed, to her constituency failed. The plea that since 'I am rich enough, I cannot be corrupted' did not jell.

Banking on the large Jat electorate, she raised caste issues but not gender issues.

In South Calcutta, eight of the 13 candidates that contested were eminent women— Mamta Bannerji representing the Congress, Bharati Mukherji CPM, Shanti Rai the BJP and Yasmin Sengupta Cong-T. Mamta romped home because she was seen as the girl next door and a true representative of the poor since her mother had worked as a domestic help in the Kalighat temple area.

CPM cadres even from South Calcutta preferred to campaign for Malini Bhattacharji who was contesting from the adjoining Jadavpur constituency. Though all women said they supported value-based politics, removal of gender injustice, population control through education, there were personal attacks on Mamta Bannerji.

Sushma Swaraj, who won from South Delhi, never attacked her main opponent Sibal. She was seen as a charismatic leader who triumphed because of door to door campaigning, group meetings and the support of women who rallied around her.

The study supports reservation for women candidates, training of contestants, sensitising women voters to support women and active participation of women's groups in support of women candidates.

# Battle to save Kutch ecology

By Usha Rai

BHUJ, Sept. 9

A major environmental battle is being fought in the Kutch region of Gujarat where a sizable chunk of the Narayan Sarovar sanctuary was denotified in 1993 for setting up a cement factory. Now the same group has gone ahead with its plans to construct a jetty at the ecologically sensitive Khauthar Islands in Kharo creek even before obtaining the necessary environmental clearance.

Last month a sub-group of the expert committee for infrastructure facilities visited the site and pushed through the jetty proposal with two well known conservationists Bittu Sehgal of Sanctuary Magazine and Shyam Chainani of the Bombay Environmental Action Group dissenting.

Within the group was at least one person who was quite determined to push through the jetty proposal because he would like to see the rich limestone deposits of the region exploited and 300 million tonnes of cement exported. He seemed oblivious of the fact that he represented the Environment Ministry Committee. At the other end of the spectrum was a

man who was worried about the future of the chinkaras traversing through the fast industrialising Lakhpat taluka to get to the Creek for their evening salt lick. Last December he had sighted a hubara bustard at the proposed jetty site.

Allegations and counter allegations flew about mangrove swamps being removed from the site of the jetty just hours before the experts visited the site, conveniently at high tide when the beheaded mangroves would be submerged; about whether the jetty came under coastal regulation zone 1 (where no development is permitted) or CRZ 3, where some industry is permitted.

In all the hype and hoopla about Sanghi Cement and its proposed jetty, a dozen people representing the scientific community, the local people and environmentalists of Kutch have come out with a report that presents the voice of sanity. Conscious of the large scale migration in the region because of lack of employment, the group has recommended smooth industrialisation of the district without destroying the environment.

The group, which includes M. K. Himmatsinji, chairman of the Rajkot division of WWF, Sandeep Virmani of the Janvikas Ecology Cell and T. A. H. Jamadar, presi-

dent of the Kutch Khedut Seva Samaj, has pointed out that in addition to the Sanghis — Anjan, DLF, ABG, ABIL and GTCL plan to set up cement factories in the region and have their own jetties.

It is possible to make Kutch the gateway to the North without destroying the marine/mangrove ecosystem and endangering the existing livelihood of the people, says Virmani. Unfortunately, private companies, he says, are averse to using the Port Trust jetties because bureaucracy impedes movement of vessels.

To save the unique ecosystem of the region, it has been suggested that the Sanghi jetty should be relocated. The first option being Kandla port which has berthing facilities for 40 vessels, but only 12 berths are operational. In fact the Marine Maritime Board plans to upgrade Mundra, Mandvi and Kandla. Koteshwar and Jakhau can also be upgraded and used instead of constructing more jetties.

Says Virmani "companies entering the area should federate and one site should be used to full capacity. Instead of waiting for the Sanghi Jetty to come up, it has been suggested that the terms and conditions for construction of jet-

ties — why, where and how many — should be decided immediately in consultation with the people of Kutch and the Government.

The group of 12 has quoted from a 1987 to 1991 Saurashtra University study "Coastal Marine Ecosystems and Anthropogenic Pressure in the Gulf of Kachchh" to point out that the mangrove belt between Jakhau and Koteshwar is the richest in the Gulf of Kutch. The report says 90 species of green brown and red algae, have been recorded in this belt. Six rare species of prawns breed in the area.

At Jakhau and Koteshwar, grey heron, Indian reef heron, pond heron and large egrets were found nesting. In fact dolphins, lesser floricans, caracal, wolf, common fox, monitor lizard, desert monitor and white winged black tit were sighted at Khauthar and its vicinity in the past few months by the group of 12.

Fears have been expressed about oil slicks, enhanced salinity from the discharged desalinated water and destruction of 50 sq kms of the marine ecosystem, including 6 kms of the west mangrove reserved forest area, if the Sanghi jetty is allowed to come up at the existing site.

# Assam island battling for survival

HT Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Oct. 13

The world's largest fresh water river island, Majuli in Jorhat district, with a population of 1.35 lakh and an idyllic pre-industrial culture, is waging a major battle for its survival.

It is feared that two-third of the island has already disappeared. Now with the pressure for spurs to protect Jorhat from the angry flood waters of the Brahmaputra and no money with Assam Government to take any special measures to protect the island, the fate of Majuli is uncertain.

Over 20 people from Majuli headed by the MP from North Lakhimpur, Mr Arun Sharma, met Prime Minister Deve Gowda and Minister for State of Planning, Mr Y. K. Alagh, recently and sought their help to protect the island.

While Mr Alagh has advised the people of the island to form a Save Majuli Society, the Association for Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD) which has adopted the island is lobbying to get it a World heritage site status. Funds would then pour in and protecting the island would be less difficult.

Some 450 years ago the Hindu reformer, Shankar Dev, is said to have visited the island and established *Satras* (monasteries) which even today teach young people martial arts and some exquisite crafts like mask and boat making. The unique Vaishnav culture of the island is best practised in the *Satras* and the *Naamghars*, spiritual and cultural centres.

Villagers take collective decision on all issues including the auctioning of fishing rights. The Raasleela held in November and



Ferry to Majuli island which may disappear in the years to come.

the local dance form, Bhavna, is unique to the island. The island's eco-system provides sustenance for some rare, endangered birds. People practise natural farming on the island — using neither pesticides nor fertilisers. If the island disappears, a whole culture will disappear, says Sanjoy Ghose of AVARD.

In 1975, an embankment — spur 8 — was constructed at Kokilamukh to protect Jorhat. When the waters hit the spur, the backlash of waters destroyed Ahatguri, a sub-division of Majuli with 30 to 40 villagers. Now the Government plans to construct a

spur at Neemati. If this happens villagers fear that Kamalabari in Majuli will disappear. It is already being eroded.

The Brahmaputra, embanked on both sides to protect cities on the river front, when in spate lashes out breaching the weaker sections of the embankment or the protective dykes girdling Majuli. Almost every monsoon a part of the island gets submerged and another part (called chaur) surfaces.

Not only is the island drowning but there is not enough basic infrastructure on the island. To get to Majuli from Jorhat, a distance of

22 km, takes four hours changing two ferries and three buses. The road between the two main towns on the island — Garamur and Kamalabari — has been breached. The road to the third town, Jengrai, is also in bad shape. But Assam Government has no money to repair the roads or to embank the island.

Since there does not seem to be enough scientific data to monitor just how much of the island has disappeared over the years, AVARD and the North-Eastern Society for Environment Conservation have initiated a remote sensing study.

# Giving human face to family planning

By Usha Rai

JAIPUR: In two of the most populous districts of Rajasthan — Tonk and Dhausa — a novel approach to population control called the Vikalp strategy is fast catapulting the districts to an enviable birth rate of 24 per 1,000 by 2001.

Conceived by Dr Devendra Kothari of the Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR) and implemented by the State, the project has a simple philosophy "help those wanting to control their fertility." With the couple protection rate going up the birth rate has to fall, say Mr Ram Lubhaya, commissioner-cum-secretary (Family Welfare).

There are no compulsions, no targets, no family planning (FP) camps. It is just a well-managed operation with the help of a computerised birth register to monitor every woman in the reproductive age group. Motivated ANMs (auxiliary nurse midwife) and LHVs (lady health visitors) provide FP services as well as child survival facilities.

In fact it was heartening to find a human face to the programme. Dapudevi, 25, wife of Rampal in Aligarh block of Tonk, had her tubes tied when her son was 5 and daughter 3. But soon after the son died in a road accident, Rampal

wrote to the district manager of the programme, Mr Hemant Dwivedi, that he wanted another baby. It did not matter if it was a girl or a boy. Dapudevi has been sent for recanalisation at SMS Hospital, Jaipur.

Surveys conducted in the State show that 30 lakh couples want family planning services. If a third of them can be helped there would be a dramatic turnabout in the demographic profile of the State, says Mr Lubhaya. In Tonk and Dhausa the number of couples not wanting babies is 78,000.

The project was launched in March/April 1995. Following the philosophy of 'catering to the unmet need,' the couple protection rate in Tonk and Dhausa has gone up from 31 and 35 to 41 and 40 respectively. This in turn is expected to bring down the birth rate in the two districts from 38.4 to 33 by the end of the current financial year. Even this is a remarkable achievement considering that the State's birth rate has remained static at 34/35 for the last 10 years, says Mr Lubhaya.

Though Dhausa has not performed as well as Tonk which has high percentage of Muslims, if the current trend continues, by 2001 the couple protection rate is expected to shoot up to 63 and this would result in the birth rate plummeting to 24 in these districts.

The glimmer of hope held out by

the Rajasthan experience is significant coming at a time when the Planning Commission has pushed back the hope of population stabilising in the country from 2001 to 2010. Chief Minister B. S. Shekhawat has been so pleased with the Vikalp experience that he has extended it to the entire State.

Instead of setting up new structures, the Vikalp model seeks to revive the District Family Welfare Bureaus by appointing a specially selected manager to run it. Instead of the curative approach of a doctor, the manager seeks to prevent births. In April 1995 a door to door survey was done by the ANMs of Tonk district and names of all eligible couples were entered in a register and their need for contraceptive services and prenatal and anti-natal facilities noted. The register is kept alive for five years.

The LHV then goes with the ANM and discusses the preferred spacing methods. Sterilisation, oral pill, IUD and the condom are the four services available. Of the 16,134 eligible couples in Tonk, 3,594 opted for sterilisation. Sixtyseven per cent of the remaining couple opted for IUD. The younger lot prefer the pill. Muslim women, who are keen to control their fertility, opt for IUD or pill. They are still chary about sterilisation.

Of the 94 who had come for IUD

insertions at the Benatha camp, only 34 were found suitable and this created a bit of storm. It was with difficulty that we could persuade them to get themselves treated for the reproductive track infection first, says Mr Dwivedi.

Of the 5,102 who had IUDs inserted in April 1995, 4,749 retained it till March this year (when a survey was conducted). The 105 who could not retain it because of anaemia or excessive bleeding were given alternatives. "As against 1,427 births averted in 1994-95, we were able to avert 4,291 in 1995-96," says Mr Dwivedi.

If a spacing method fails, a medical termination of the pregnancy is encouraged. But this is done in the specially set up reproductive health centres at each block with proper medical facilities. There are 3.5 to 4 lakh abortions (legal and illegal) every year in the State. Rural people are spending Rs 200 to Rs 300 on an abortion in the first trimester, Rs 300 to Rs 500 for a second trimester abortion and Rs 900 for an abortion in the sixth month of pregnancy. Now there will be less of these dangerous, illegal abortions.

Though Vikalp does not believe in incentives and disincentives, the Rajalakshmi scheme which ensures Rs 20,000 for the daughter of a couple going in for a terminal method despite having only one or

two daughters does serve as an incentive. Some 450 qualified for the special assistance in Tonk in the first year of Vikalp and 130 so far this year.

Rewards up to Rs 10,000 will also be given to ANMs who are able to bring down birth rate substantially in their area of operation.

But Vikalp's valiant efforts for a special, quality programme are being stymied by doctors and private nursing homes who fear losing out to the well oiled family planning machinery headed by a manager. Doctors and ANMs are being transferred too frequently. At the Deoli Reproductive Health Centre, upgraded in Sept. 1995 from a post partum centre, the third doctor, a male, who had barely won the confidence of the women, was on his way out.

All non-family welfare responsibilities are supposed to be vested with the male health workers but in Rajasthan they are invisible. ANMs are, therefore, being diverted for malaria, TB control and other such work. There are 700 waiting to get a laparoscopy because the rings are not available.

Rajasthan could well have struck gold in Vikalp but the key functionaries, including the Kotharis and Lubhayas, should not be disturbed for at least five years. Then you can award them or hang them.

## Prasar Bharati Act

# I&B Ministry moots amendments

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 23

Bowing to public pressure, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry has proposed amendments to the Prasar Bharati Act making it don the mantle of a public service broadcaster.

A note prepared for Cabinet states that in the existing preamble of the Act the words Prasar Bharati "for providing public service broadcasting" is to be added to clearly define the objective of the Prasar Bharati and to lay emphasis on its public service character.

The final amendments to the 1990 Act are based on recommendations of at least three expert groups — the Sengupta Committee, the report of the Independent Initiative, the Paswan Committee report and various judgments of the Supreme Court and the High Courts.

However, the proposal for comprehensive legislation for regulation of private broadcasting, including cable TV, is under consideration separately. Doordarshan and Akashvani — which will continue to function as separate, inde-

pendent units — may not come under the purview of that legislation.

However, as Dr Bhaskar Rao, Director of the Centre for Media Studies and a key member of the Independent Initiative for public service broadcasting pointed out, there is a basic contradiction in the proposed amendments. Though deemed a public service broadcaster, the Corporation has been asked to generate its own resources. The essence of public service broadcasting is that it should not have to scrounge around for funds, says Mr Rao.

To ensure the autonomy of the Prasar Bharati, the Ministry has said it should become financially independent. So a cess on radio and television sets has been proposed. This together with its own advertisement revenue is expected to be enough to meet the financial needs of the Corporation. Till its financial viability is assured the existing budgetary support would continue.

The Corporation is expected to work out its own programme and advertisement codes. It is expected to fix limits on broadcast of advertisements and ensure that

adequate time is available for public service broadcasting.

Under the proposed Prasar Bharati Corporation, DD and AIR will have separate service cadres, assets, etc and will continue to be headed by their respective DGs (Managing Directors in case the Prasar Bharati Board decides to provide corporate structures for the two units).

As per the proposed amendments the Prasar Bharati Board will now have a full time chairman-CEO. There will be members for finance, personnel, programme planning and technical planning plus 6 part time members. The DGs managing directors of Doordarshan and Akashvani and representatives of the I&B Ministry not below the rank of a joint secretary. However, the earlier proposal to have two elected representatives of the employees on the Board has been dropped.

The Ministry has recommended that the chairman should be a person with knowledge and experience in administration, management and could be from the field of broadcasting, education, literature, arts, culture, music, drama or journalism.

Since Akashvani and Doordarshan are to be converted lock, stock and barrel into the PB Corporation, the employees of the two cadres will become employees of the Corporation. However, Indian Information Service and Central Secretariat staff working with AIR and DD, can go back to their parent cadre or continue on deputation in accordance with the terms and conditions decided by the Corporation.

The proposal to have a parliamentary committee overseeing the work of the Prasar Bharati Corporation has been dropped since it would be accountable to the Consultative Committee of the I&B Ministry and the Standing Committee on communications.

Dr Bhaskar Rao, who was appreciative of Information and Broadcasting Minister C. M. Ibrahim's efforts to have the Act amended as per public demand, was disappointed that the public right to respond or reply has not been provided in the proposed amendments. The amount of the cess on TV and radio sets has also not been spelt out. It is also not clear if it will be a one-time cess or an annual tax.

## Keeping out the right women

Usha Rai evaluates the work of the National Commission for Women and laments its shortfalls

**T**HERE are any number of bright, talented and articulate Indian women that could represent the country at any forum — Indian or international. But why is it that our own key organisations for promoting the cause of women, like the National Commission for Women (NCW) and the Central Social Welfare Board, are filled with women who neither know about women's issues, nor have the commitment to take up cudgels on their behalf.

When Mohini Giri was appointed as the chairperson of the NCW over a year ago, there was a sigh of relief and renewed hope that the Commission would finally deliver. To be fair to Mrs Giri, she has been like a top that has not stopped spinning. But, alas, most of the other members have not been able to pull their weight. The result is that the Commission operates like a fire brigade, rushing out to quell a fire, rather than act as a think tank.

To make matters worse, the two members appointed recently — Mrs Indira Basavaraj, a lecturer in botany from Bangalore, and Ms Sukeshi Oram, a 29-year-old tribal from Orissa, who has worked as a supervisor with the *anganwadi* workers, have never really worked with the women's movement. Ms Oram is a double M.A., but both women lack experience and charisma and cannot speak Hindi or English fluently. They should have been groomed for public office in

Janata Dal and outside it, were suggested. These included Devaki Jain, Ranjana Kumari, Mrinal Gore, Asha Ramesh, Zena Sorabji, Bilkeez Latif, Renukadevi Barakataki and Annie Prasad, the former secretary of the NCW. The women's studies departments also have several women ideal for the job.

Devaki Jain's name was even suggested as chairperson of the Karnataka Commission for Women, but she could not find a place there. Why is that men who decide on the destinies of women's organisations prefer someone who is incompetent and voiceless to someone who is dynamic and a go-getter? Is it a deliberate move to stifle these organisations? Do men feel threatened by women of substance?

The Central Social Welfare Board has already been crippled not only by a wrong choice of people to head it but by setting up parallel structures of power. It was Dr Durgabai Deshmukh who had the vision to set up a Board that would act as interface between the government and the voluntary sector and translate government policies into reality.

To give stature and credibility to the Board Dr Deshmukh brought in senior positions women like Vimla Sharma and Mrs Mohan Lal Sukhadia, wives of Shankar Dayal Sharma and the Chief Minister of Rajasthan. Both women were, however, social workers in their own right. After

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*This is not an attack on the new members but on the political system that by patronage and wrong selection cripples what should be a premier organisation for women. While Ms Basavaraj is quite clearly the gift of HRD Minister S. R. Bommai, Ms Oram has been foisted on the Commission by Biju Patnaik. When someone pointed out to Mr Bommai that Ms Oram may not be a good choice, he is believed to have said what is the great work that the Commission is doing.*

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their home states before being jettisoned on the national scene.

For a year now the Commission has been crying hoarse about inadequate staff, the undeclared status of the chairperson and members and the lack of machinery to look into the mountain of complaints received. The 11 State Commissions that have been set up also suffer from a lack of infrastructure and resources.

This is not an attack on the new members but on the political system that by patronage and wrong selection cripples what should be a premier organisation for women. While Ms Basavaraj is quite clearly the gift of HRD Minister S. R. Bommai, Ms Oram has been foisted on the Commission by Biju Patnaik. When someone pointed out to Mr Bommai that Ms Oram may not be a good choice, he is believed to have said what is the great work that the Commission is doing.

If women are particularly peeved at the choice of the new members, it is because the Janata Dal has so many good women who would have been an asset to the Commission. Promila Dandavate was to be appointed the chairperson of the first Commission, but the National Front government was dislodged and the Congress government appointed Jayanti Patnaik.

It would probably have not been fair to appoint Mrs Dandavate as just another member of the Commission. But other names, from within the

first flush of enthusiasm, the CSWB was reduced to a showpiece. Over the years, as rival structures like the Department of Women and Child, the Indian Council for Child Welfare, and the National Institute for Public Cooperation and Child Development came up, the Board has been reduced to a grant giving organisation. It would be a shame if the NCW was also reduced to just another institution by corroding political influences. The power struggle between the NCW and the Department of Women and Child, which should service it, are already pretty apparent.

There is no action on the various recommendations and laws sent by the Commission from time to time. Despite all this the Commission has been able to get the cooperation of women's groups of all political hues. It has become the fulcrum of the women's movement for the 33 per cent reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies.

Unfortunately, the NCW seems to be the last priority of bureaucrats and male politicians. It is still not too late to rectify the mistakes. Give teeth to the NCW and bring into its fold competent women, whether from academic institutions or grass-root movement. So frustrated is Mrs Mohini Giri that she is willing to throw in the towel and go back to her Guild of Service where she can ensure that her dreams are translated into reality.

## Tiger cell to be detached from WWF-India

By Usha Rai and  
Avinash Singh

NEW DELHI, Dec. 14

In a desperate bid to save the image of the World Wide Fund as well as to save the millions of dollars coming into its kitty in the name of the tiger, the WWF-International and WWF-UK have decided to take the tiger cell out of the purview of WWF-India and set it up as a separate body.

Mr Tom Mathew, current secretary general Samar Singh's predecessor who is working on biodiversity conservation with WWF-US, is being brought back to head the cell next week.

Mr Samar Singh, a former additional secretary in the Environment and Forest Ministry on deputation to WWF-India, was recently at the receiving end of two virulent attacks by Tiger Trust and the Environmental Investigation Agency, two London-based international organisations, for WWF's failure to check the massive poaching of tigers in India though millions of dollars had been raised in the name of the king of the jungles.

Mr Samar Singh, however, stated that WWF-International did not have the powers to take the tiger unit out of WWF-India. This

country, he said, has its own board of trustee to oversee the Indian operations. At a meeting in London on Dec. 7, Mr Singh said he had demanded more funds for India's tiger conservation work from the millions raised abroad. So far WWF-India, he said had received only \$ 100,000.

The WWF-International, he said had agreed to give the equivalent of 2 million Swiss Francs which would be about Rs 5 to Rs 6 crore. The Tiger Conservation Unit, he said, would now be strengthened and a steering group of Indians and foreigners will guide the conservation work. "They are welcome to appoint Tom Mathew as the head of the unit but it will be very much a part of WWF-India," he stated.

Despite the \$ 7,50,000 raised in the name of the tiger by WWF-UK, Mr Michael Day of Tiger Trust maintained that 500 tigers a year were killed in India. He alleged wasteful expenditure of valuable conservation money.

Mr Dave Currey of EIA estimated the tiger slaughter at a tiger a day. The Indian Government, which spent \$ 24,93,744 on Project Tiger in 1994-95 and which is the sole custodian of India's forest wealth—flora and fauna included—was also severely mauled by the cat-watchers.

Since the release of the two re-

ports there has been great pressure on Mr Samar Singh to step down. When Singh would not oblige, he was summoned to London on Dec. 7 and told by the head of WWF-UK and WWF-International that he would no longer be in charge of the tiger cell.

Mr Samar Singh, may not be the easiest man to get on with. In fact, Mr Singh has as many enemies as friends in the environment sector. But few in India question Mr Singh's integrity or his commitment to India's forests and wildlife. By making him a scapegoat of the games being played by the international agencies in the name of the tiger, not only has WWF-India got mud on its face, but it may lose a good man.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh is keen to get him back to the cadre as Chief Secretary. The present Chief Secretary, Mr S. C. Behar, retires next month. MP has given itself the status of a Tiger State since it has, according to the 1993 census, the largest number of tiger—912 tigers. Mr Samar Singh may decide to pack up and do a more useful job, even in terms of saving the tiger, in a State which wants him.

No one doubts the fact that India, which has two-third of the world population of tigers, is losing them very fast. While the last census in 1993 put the number of

tigers in India at 3,750, the international agencies claim it may be just 2500 to 2750. While the major thrust of the western critics is on India's failure to check the large scale poaching of tigers for skins and bones, there has not been much focus on habitat destruction because of large scale mining etc.

Though 34 international conservationists wrote to Prime Minister Deve Gowda in October that the Indian Board for Wildlife had not met for eight years, the situation has still not been remedied. More recently 50 MPs wrote to the PM expressing concern for the tiger.

The onus of protecting the Indian tiger is clearly that of the Indian Government. But the budget of Rs 25 crore or \$ 8 million a year is peanuts for protecting such vast tiger tracts. Even the Global Tiger Forum, set up after much fanfare two years ago, has not received enough money to protect tigers in the 13 tiger range countries.

If WWF-International or WWF-UK think they can save the tiger by removing the tiger cell from WWF-India, they will have to rethink, said a trustee of WWF-India who does not wish to be named. Not only is more money needed but practical strategies, involving people living around protected areas, have to be worked out to save the tiger from extinction.

FOCUS

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**T**HE spate of recent judgments by the Supreme Court as well as High Courts in Delhi and Calcutta show quite clearly that the Environment and Forest Ministry has failed to protect the nation's environment.

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In fact there could be no greater indictment of the Ministry than its own Minister, Kamal Nath, diverting forest land for constructing a sprawling hotel complex in Kulu. When a part of the hotel got washed away in the floods last year, using his political clout, the Minister almost got away with diverting a river so that his hotel could be saved for posterity at the cost of some poor farmers' agricultural fields.

It is not that all bureaucrats in the Ministry are bad officers. But very few have any real commitment to environment and most of them are birds of passage. Instead of confronting their political bosses on blatantly wrong environment decisions, they succumb to political pressures whether it is for diversion of forest land or providing environment clearance for eco-unfriendly power projects.

States have been chaffing about coming to the Centre for all clearances. Biju Patnaik in Orissa and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat in Rajasthan have been at the vanguard of the movement for decentralisation of powers vested with the Centre. They would like to set up power projects where they want, lease out mines even if they are in forest areas and give degraded forest areas to industries to grow their needs for pulp and plywood. Bowing to these pressures without realising their environmental costs, Prime Minister Deve Gowda recently announced that no Central clearance would be required for power projects that cost up to Rs 1000 crore.

Former Environment Minister Maneka Gandhi who went to the Supreme Court questioning the environmental clearance to Cogentrix and several other projects has pointed out that conditional clearance is given under political pressure but the conditions are seldom fulfilled and the Ministry stays silent.

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Felling down forest wealth

As per the order, 10,000 mines in Rajasthan operating on forest land would be closed. Most of these mines, on just a hectare of land, are owned by powerful bureaucrats and politicians. In Orissa 70 to 80 large bauxite, manganese and other mines owned by businessmen would be closed. The return from each of these mines is to the tune of like Rs 50 to Rs 100 crore annually. Because of political pressure various efforts of the Environment Ministry to shut down the mines on forest land have come to naught.

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West Bengal. In fact in no part of the country can trees be felled in forests unless the working plan is prepared and approved by the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

According to a report submitted by the Ministry to the Planning Commission in 1992, the annual withdrawal from the forest is Rs 30,000 crore. As a result of the Supreme Court interim order an additional 9 million hectares will be covered by the FCA. Approximately a third of the population of India living in and around forests will be the direct beneficiaries of the Court order. They will have now have better access to forest produce.

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If the Ministry is incapable of caring for the environment and the biodiversity of the country, who will care for it? How many people have the resources and the stamina to keep running to the courts? An independent National Environment Impact Assessment Authority, headed by a retired Supreme Court judge with technical experts and well known environmentalists has been suggested by Maneka Gandhi and some others.

There is no guarantee that this too will not be subverted or that it will be effective. Recently an Environment Impact Assessment Authority for the National Capital Region, headed by a retired Allahabad High Court judge, R. K. Shukla, was set up. Shukla, for all his good intentions, is quite clearly a new comer to the environment scene. Other members are the chairman of the Central Pollution Control Board, Environment Secretaries of the States of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana and the chief regional planner of NCR. Will Environment Secretaries who have failed to protect the environment individually be able to do so collectively? Only time will tell.

"Many things we need can wait, the child cannot. Now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, his mind is being developed. To him we cannot say tomorrow. His name is today". "I cried I had no shoes till I saw a child who had no feet".

THE first quotation is by Gabriela Mistral, the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet. I do not know the author of the second. But both have been etched in my memory, joggling the conscience of the sensitive when they see a hungry, uncared for child, a working child or a young one who becomes the victim of a senseless war — crippled both physically and mentally.

For 50 years UNICEF has sought to give first priority to the child in the international, social order of the day. It has focussed on killer child diseases, whether it is diphtheria, whooping cough, polio or the more invidious diarrhoea and iodine deficiency disorders. In India, where potable water remains a mirage, it has sought to ensure that a network of hand pumps provide clean, drinking water.

But with development and modernisation, new problems loom large on the horizon. One of the most serious, already affecting children, is the impact of negative images on television — violence in particular. To counter this the International Council of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and UNICEF have been observing an International Children's Day of Broadcasting on December 15 for the five years.

Some 2,263 television and radio stations in 171 countries, from satellite networks covering continents to tiny community radio stations in war-torn countries have joined the initiative to ensure social responsibility in broadcasting.

This year the US National Alliance for non-violent programming has supported the 1996 International Children's Day of Broadcasting as a positive step towards media literacy for the 21st century global media culture.

UNICEF's executive director Carol Bellamy says that broadcasters have been extremely supportive. Many of them not only air programmes on child concerns but devote an entire day or week to children.

Bellamy says that while the television industry needs to address the issue of violence in the media, it has to take into account the violence in the real world. From Bosnia to Rwanda, children have become deliberate targets of warfare. Violent crimes and gang wars are a major

problem in a growing number of countries. In addition, in almost every country, in every home, children are being abused.

Even children who are not in war zones or violent situations are being affected by the violence depicted in the media. Young children are heavy television viewers. In some countries they watch 20 to 30 hours of TV in a week — more time than they devote to any other activity other than sleeping.

Television brings violence into the home as news and entertainment — and as a strange hybrid of the two — making it difficult

#### What can be done

**F**OCUSSED ON December 15, last year in Asia, Turner Networks Television and Cartoon Network organised a "Toons that Care Day" on drug abuse and other issues affecting children.

- In Belize, the Belize Broadcasting Corporation brought students to the city to produce their own programmes on child rights.

- In Switzerland, Raido Suisse Romande's morning programme, Magellan, focussed on children for a week, interviewing young people who were refugees or victims of war in countries around the world.

- In the UK, BBC Radio featured a story about a girl who had lost her father in the Northern Ireland conflict.

- In Zimbabwe, the State television aired a TV and radio documentary on the sexual abuse of children, featuring a discussion among four young people.

- In Yugoslavia young people mobilised to collect Christmas presents for disadvantaged children.

for adults and children to distinguish between reality and fiction.

Because they lack real-life experience against which to compare and judge what they see on the screen, and because their own personalities and value systems are still developing, UNICEF studies show children are very susceptible to the violence they see on the small box.

Exposure to heavy doses of TV violence increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour, especially in boys. Gender differences are reinforced by much of what is offered on TV. Thus, boys tend to identify with male characters who are strong and

# Arms and the child

Even as some issues are being resolved, new problems are cropping up for children all over the world, ranging from conscription in armies to the impact of negative images in media. USHA RAI reports . . .

aggressive, while the girls identify with the victims.

TV tends to present violence in unrealistic, misleading and glorified ways. Fictional programming often presents violence as all-pervasive, legitimate, rewarded, effective, even clean.

News programmes and documentaries too, can distort violence, selectively exaggerating or sensationalising events. The News Track pictures of the bleeding body of the student (who was protesting the Mandal Commission recommendations) being dragged by the foot by a policeman who had gunned him down are still vivid in public memory.

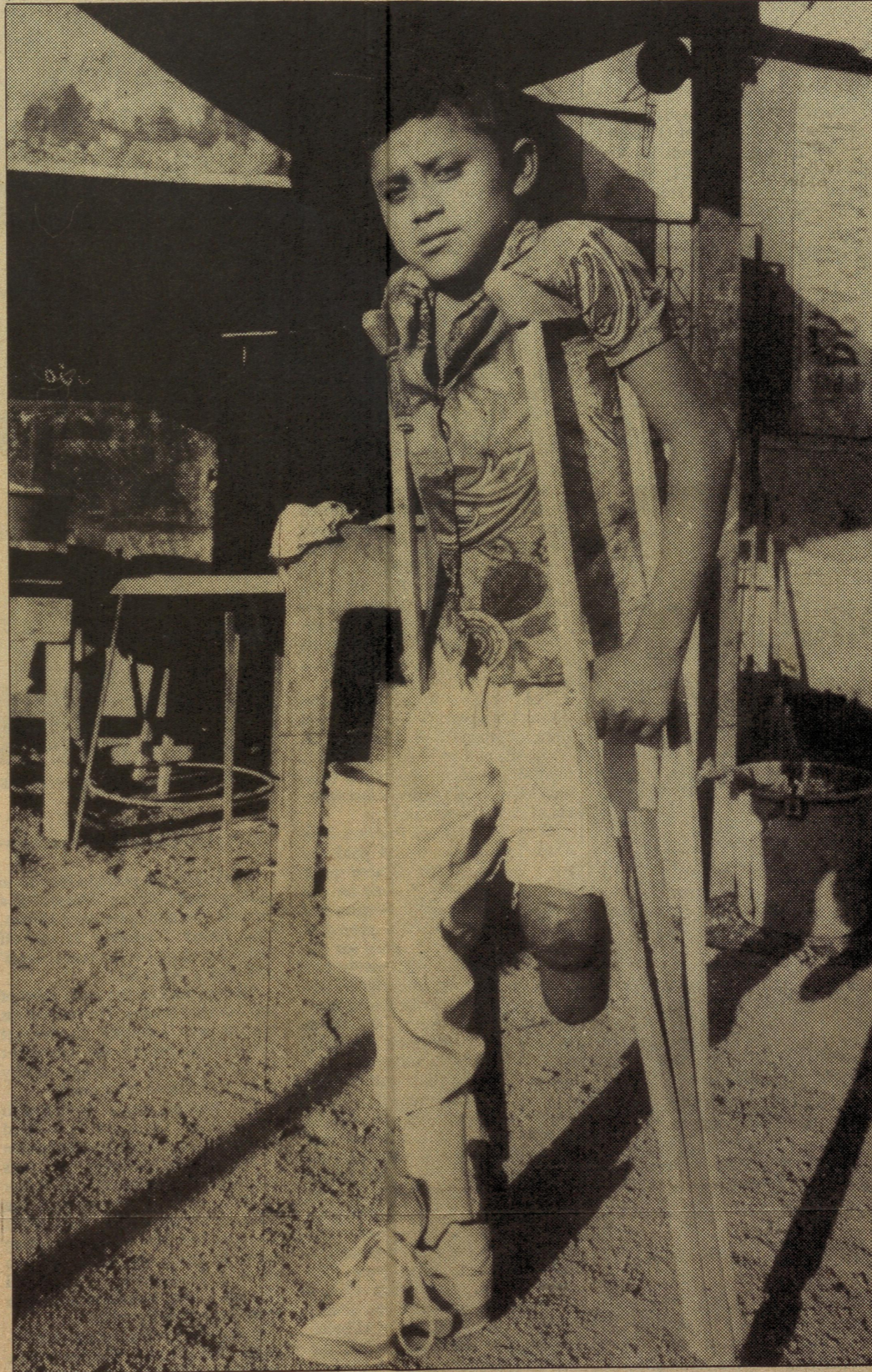
With the mushrooming of cable and satellite channel there is greater competition to produce and hawk the most graphic pictures — the bloodier the image, the greater the chance of it being picked up by more channels.

Clearly, violence on the screen is an increasingly serious problem that demands action. As Bellamy puts it "The way ahead lies not only in looking at how to eliminate violence on television, but also in looking at how to strengthen television's power to inspire positive change".

But TV also has potential for good. It can contribute substantially to children's education and development, apart from finding solutions to senseless violence and intolerance.

And while it is not easy for working parents to control or regulate a child's TV viewing, they cannot abdicate this responsibility of curtailing the effects of excessive media violence on the young. Carol Bellamy pleads for partnership between governments, the TV industry, communities, parents and children themselves.

While parents should limit or monitor children's television viewing; broadcasters should provide appropriate, quality programmes for kids. They should refrain from offering violence shows during peak viewing time and adopt mechanisms and voluntary codes of behaviour. An international Children's Television Charter has emerged from the work of the past two years. Rejecting gratuitous scenes of violence and sex, the charter is specifically aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty ratified by most countries.



Ten-year-old Marvin of Nicaragua lost his leg due to a landmine

**E**VEN as we march into the 21st century with hope in our hearts that children will grow up healthier, stronger, less exploited and better educated, last month Ms Graca Machel, the UN Secretary-General's expert on the Impact of Armed Conflict on children, has presented a horrendous report on the conscription of children as soldiers.

Though statistically invisible, Machel says that children under 15 are serving in government or opposition forces in at least 25 conflict zones. In Liberia children as young as seven have been found in combat while in Cambodia a survey of wounded soldier showed that 20 per cent of them were between the ages of 10 and 14. In 1988 it is estimated that some 200,000 child soldiers, under 16 years of age, saw armed combat.

Will the world body be able to check the recruitment of children below 18 in armed forces... will it be able to halt this brutalisation of childhood and innocence? In Afghanistan, where about 90 per cent of children now have no access to education, the proportion of child soldiers has increased from 30 per cent to at least 45 per cent.

The basic reason for children joining armed groups is economic. Hunger and poverty, says Machel drive parents to offer their children for services. In some cases armies pay a minor soldier's wage directly to the family. Child participation is difficult to establish as, sometimes, whole families move with armed groups.

Children may volunteer on their own if they feel this is the only way to guarantee regular meals, clothing or medical attention. There are case studies of parents who encourage their daughters to become soldiers if their marriage prospects are poor.

The participation of girls often entails their being forced to provide sexual service. Often, children of both sexes start out as cooks, porters, messengers and spies. But it does not take long before they are placed in the heat of the battle, where inexperience and lack of training leave them vulnerable.

A child from Honduras told Machel, "At the age of 13 I joined the student movement. I had a dream to change things so that children are not hungry... Later I joined the armed struggle. I had all the inexperience and fears of a little girl. I found out that girls were forced to have sexual relations to alleviate the sadness of the com-

batants'. And who alleviated our sadness after going with someone we hardly knew? At my young age I experienced abortion. It was not my decision. There is a great pain in my being when I recall all these things....in spite of my commitment they abused me, they trampled my human dignity. And above all, they did not understand that I was a child and that I had rights."

In Lebanon and Sri Lanka the young people's immaturity has been used to recruit and train them for suicide bombing. But in some countries children identify with and fight for social causes, religious expression, self-determination or national liberation.

Directly related to war and war zones are the landmines that have left millions of children crippled. They continue to explode long after cease fire has been enforced. The global campaign to ban landmines began in 1992 but execution has been tardy. When a war ceases, it should be mandatory for the countries involved to clear the mines.

Clearing landmines, however, is a long and expensive business; each one takes 100 times longer to remove than to deploy. A weapon that cost \$3 or less to manufacture may eventually cost \$1000 to remove. Countries most contaminated by mines are generally among the poorest, so there is little prospect of their de-mining. A Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Clearing has been set up by the UN and contributions of \$19.5 million have come in. But this is just a fourth of the \$75 million that was to be raised.

Many legal experts believe that landmines are already an illegal weapon under international law and their use should be prohibited.

Today, children in at least 68 countries live amid the contamination of more than 110 million landmines. In addition there are millions of unexploded ordnance — bombs, shells and grenades that failed to detonate on impact. Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia have at least 28 million landmines, as well as 85 per cent of the world's landmine casualties.

Angola with an estimated 10 million landmines has an amputee population of 70,000 — 8000 of them being children.

In Cambodia 61 per cent of families with a mine victim to support were in debt because of the accident. When a parent is a mine casualty, the lost ability to work can weaken the care and protection available to the child. In Afghanistan unemployment of adult males shot up from 6 to 52 per cent as a result of the land mine accidents. So even as some issues are being resolved, newer problems are cropping up for the child. Can we restore to them the childhood they so rightly deserve?

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