

**almost three**  
**(August in the Bronx, New York City)**

by Anne Murphy

When it is hot  
 you sleep in my room  
 in the cool of the conditioned air.

And it is as it was  
 when you were tiny,  
 your smooth skin next to me,  
 translucent, soft, and gently warm.

You reach out for my arm  
 and it is as if  
 your hand melts through me  
 and you are inside me again,  
 the little baby still part of me  
 who talks and laughs and makes faces  
 and holds his hands up in surprise  
 when  
 he doesn't get his way.

You melt into me, or me into you.  
 And in the cool of the hot summer  
 under the buzz of the air conditioner  
 you are mine again,  
 who was of me  
 but is more than me,  
 melting into me, me into you.

August 2, 2006

ਮੇਰਾ ਨਿਕਚੁ  
 (ਆਪਣੇ ਤਿੰਨੋਂ ਕੁ ਸਾਲ ਦੇ ਬੱਚੇ ਲਈ। ਸਮਾਂ: ਬਰਾਂਕਸ,  
 ਨਿਊਯਾਰਕ ਦੀ ਅਗਸਤ)

ਜਦੋਂ ਗਰਮੀ ਹੁੰਦੀ ਹੈ,  
 ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰੇ ਕਮਰੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਆ ਕੇ ਸੌ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈਂ  
 ਠੰਢੀ ਕੀਤੀ ਹੋਈ ਹਵਾ ਵਿੱਚ

ਤੇ ਇਹ ਉਸੇ ਤਰ੍ਹਾਂ ਹੈ ਜਿਵੇਂ ਉਦੋਂ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਸੀ,  
 ਜਦੋਂ ਤੂੰ ਨਿਕਚੁ ਜਿਹਾ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਸੀ  
 ਜਦੋਂ ਤੈਰੀ ਚਮੜੀ ਮੈਨੂੰ ਛੋਹਦੀ ਸੀ

ਮੁਲਾਇਮ ਨਿਘੀ ਨਰਮ  
 ਜਿਸ 'ਚੋਂ ਚਾਨਣ ਲੰਘ ਸਕਦਾ

ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰੀ ਬਾਂਹ ਤੇ ਹੱਥ ਰਖਦਾ ਹੈਂ  
 ਤੂੰ ਲਗਦਾ ਹੈ  
 ਤੇਰਾ ਹੱਥ ਮੇਰੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਪਿਘਲ ਗਿਆ ਹੈ  
 ਤੂੰ ਫੇਰ ਮੇਰੇ ਅੰਦਰ ਆ ਗਿਆ ਹੈਂ-  
 ਨਿੱਕਾ ਜਿਹਾ ਬੇਬੀ  
 ਹੁਣ ਗੱਲਾਂ ਕਰਦਾ, ਹਸਦਾ, ਮੂੰਹ ਬਣਾਉਂਦਾ  
 ਤੇ ਆਪਣੀ ਮਰਜ਼ੀ ਨਾ ਚੱਲਣ ਤੇ  
 ਅਚੰਭੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਹੱਥ ਉਪਰ ਚੁਕਦਾ

ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰੇ ਅੰਦਰ ਪਿਘਲ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈਂ  
 ਜਾਂ ਮੈਂ ਤੇਰੇ ਅੰਦਰ

ਤੇ ਗਰਮੀਆਂ ਦੀ ਇਸ ਨਕਲੀ ਠੰਢ ਵਿੱਚ  
 ਕੁਲਰ ਦੀ ਡਿਊਟੀਆਂ ਠੱਲੇ  
 ਤੂੰ ਫੇਰ ਮੇਰਾ ਹੈਂ  
 ਪਰ ਉਸ ਤੋਂ ਵੀ ਵੱਧ -  
 ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਪਿਘਲ ਰਿਹਾ  
 ਮੈਂ ਤੇਰੇ ਵਿੱਚ

The Punjabi version of this poem was  
 previously published in the Punjabi  
 literary magazine *Hum* in October 2008.

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# Canada India Village Aid

Fostering self-help and economic innovation in rural India

## Flood Relief in Bihar



November 2008

# Flood Relief Bulletin

## CIVA Approves \$30,000 for Flood Relief in Bihar and Orissa

by Sophie Low-Ber

Canada India Village Aid thanks our donors for enabling us to answer pleas from two of our Indian partners—Rashtra Seva Dal and ASHA—for help in the wake of the devastating flooding of August and September 2008.

Due to our enthusiastic Board and strong relationships with our Indian NGO partners, we were able to send over C \$30,000 to aid emergency relief efforts. These floods, which have received minimal Western media coverage, highlight our modest organization's ability to react quickly to situations, and to help out during tragedies that never reach the mainstream spotlight.

Over two million people were made homeless by the worst flooding in India in over half a century. (The somewhat different figures below reflect the best information available to the writers at the time.) Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called it a "national calamity." The waters rose in one of India's poorest states, Bihar, after the Kosi River, swollen by monsoon rains, burst an upstream dam in Nepal on 18 August 2008. The waterway reverted to a heavily populated course, killing at least 55 people, destroying some 250,000 homes, and leaving thousands of acres submerged. The death toll since August has risen significantly as water-borne diseases took hold; adults and children already weakened by malnourishment had no access to food and shelter. Food riots broke out in several areas.

Interesting comparisons have been drawn with the Katrina emergency in New Orleans: the horrible effects of the Kosi River flooding might have been avoided had the embankment been properly maintained. Experts said that a river embankment in Nepal—for which the Indian government is responsible under a treaty between the two countries—failed when the river was flowing at only about a sixth of the design capacity of the defense. Locals who noted that the river was about to



breach the embankment, three days before it did, were ignored. Villagers stranded in remote areas of Bihar were forced to resort to desperate attempts to summon help. Sanjeev Kumar, a victim of the flood, was able to send a text message from his mobile phone which read: "Time is running out for me and there is no relief in sight and I have not eaten for days."

**Rashtra Seva Dal**, an impressive grassroots organization with whom CIVA has worked for the last couple of years, sent us a request for support in early September:

Dear Canada India Village Aid,

This is to enquire whether CIVA could help us to cope with the emergency situation caused by the Kosi floods that have devastated the area in Bihar where RSD (Rashtra Seva Dal) has been working since 1993. The river broke through the man-made embankments and washed away thousands of huts carrying the meager belongings of these extremely poor people. Very little aid has reached the interior areas of Kisanganj, Katiyar, Arariya, Madhepura and some parts of Purnea. This is the area where we have developed a fairly successful project among Muslim and Dalit women farm workers who are poor even by Bihar standards.

In 1993, we started by holding a camp for Muslim and Dalit women with the dual purpose of impressing upon them the importance of education and also of being organized for their legal rights. (Last year CIVA had funded a similar camp in another part of Bihar.) We were encouraged to expand our activities in the area. We started schools for child laborers by persuading the community to donate small pieces of land for building these schools. These schools were housed in simple structures just like the huts their parents lived in. We had started 20 such schools in 4 districts of Bihar. We had similar structures built to hold meetings of the women's groups.

All these structures have been washed away. Similarly, the huts where the families of these children lived have been washed away. We do not have resources to rebuild everything that Kosi has swallowed, but we would at least like to do our part in helping a part of the community to put their lives back together. We would like to help them rebuild their shelters and restore some of the essential belongings that they have lost.

We would like to request a sum of Rs. 10,00,000 (ten lakhs). Ideally, we would like to use Rs. 4,00,000 for rebuilding the schools (= 20 X Rs. 20,000), and the rest for helping the community members to replace their

activist, leading peaceful demonstrations for non-violence, and being arrested more than once. This led to a more direct involvement in politics. To help connect grass roots projects with enduring policy changes, Lalji formed KADDAM, a people's party representing the interests of marginalized people, including Muslims, Maldhari, and Dalits (untouchables) and working to increase access of these people to their rights under the Indian Constitution.

As if all that were not enough, Lalji has become treasurer of the World Alliance for Mobile People, a UN agency dedicated to advancing the rights of all nomadic and indigenous people of the world. Lalji continues to inspire all of us at CIVA with his courage, compassion and dedication to improving the lives of marginalized people around the world. □



Ann Duffy, Catherine Strickland, and Lalji Desai at a North Vancouver fundraising dinner for MARAG

## Swanirvar: Safe Drinking Water

by Suzanne Buckley

**S**wanirvar means "self reliance." Based in Andharmanik in West Bengal, this NGO works in a number of areas, including sustainable agriculture, health, and education (especially primary and pre-primary). High levels of arsenic in ground water is a significant problem in large areas of West Bengal and Bangladesh, affecting over 90 million people. Since 2007 CIVA has supported Swanirvar's efforts towards making arsenic-free water available to villages.

In the three years prior to our involvement, Swanirvar set up 21 Arsenic Abatement Plants in 20 villages in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, and undertook extensive community awareness and water testing campaigns there and in the Nadia districts. Even villages already aware of arsenic in ground water were not always informed that both tube wells and deep wells which tested as safe could become unsafe over time due to gradual arsenic leaching into well-water. Swanirvar therefore stresses the importance of regular testing of well-water through

both large-scale and home-based arsenic-removal units. A program which distributes affordable domestic arsenic filters is now covering its own costs.

CIVA funded the current phase of this project in October 2007, and renewed funding this year. With our support, Swanirvar has undertaken dozens of awareness events advocating rain water harvesting—once a common source of potable water, now almost totally abandoned in favour of the wide-spread drilling of tube wells and deep wells. Swanirvar is now filming an educational documentary about re-introduction of rain water for drinking and cooking, and setting up two harvesting structures to demonstrate larger-scale rain collection methods.

Both the West Bengal government and the Central government were slow to recognize the gravity of the arsenic poisoning problem. Although the governments have pledged significant funding, their programs are progressing extremely slowly; many villages are not even included in their plans.

The work Swanirvar has done over the last four years has saved many lives. It has also helped affected communities recognize the problem and understand the importance of regular water testing, and has given them the power and knowledge to be more pro-active and involved in engaging their local and state politicians in addressing this problem more directly and efficiently.

I have personally supported Swanirvar for almost ten years, with great admiration for their dedication, their focus on simple, low-cost and easily replicable solutions to many problems, and the way they constantly strive to improve people's lives by empowering them through awareness programmes and hands-on education. Some of their projects have gotten national exposure on India's Durdashan TV network.

Despite this, they continue to struggle to cover their costs. In 2007, the total budget for all their initiatives was approximately \$150,000. CIVA is very proud of our contribution. □

# Lalji Desai: What a difference one person can make!

by Catherine Strickland

“My wife and I, we both believe that we shouldn’t waste our time during vacation by visiting places where we won’t learn anything or where we cannot give something back to the community.” —Lalji Desai, quoted by Austin Considine in the Travel section of the *New York Times*, 6 November 2008

**L**alji Desai, who visited Vancouver this summer and gave inspirational talks to a local fundraiser and a CIVA board meeting, is an internationally recognized advocate for the rights of the world’s indigenous nomadic people.

He is a member of the unique Maldhari culture—shepherds who raise cattle, sheep, and goats and are the primary source of dairy products in their communities. Lalji is a leader in his people’s struggle to obtain such fundamental human rights as the right to vote, access to education and health care, and self-determination for themselves and their children. Lalji is a wonderful example/model of what a difference one person can make to improve the lives of people in the communities where they live.

I met Lalji in 1995 on my first trip to India because of his friendship with my sister-in-law Wendy, who had interned with the Aga Khan Rural Support Program for nine months in southern Gujarat. Wendy became very close friends with both Lalji and his fiancé Neeta Pandya. The year before I arrived, Neeta had launched the **Maldhari Rural Action Group** (MARAG) with Lalji’s support. That first visit enabled me to see marag’s work up close, and to realize that this organization was addressing an urgent need within the Maldhari community.

Over the next three years I had the pleasure of visiting India several times, each time reconnecting with Lalji and Neeta. It did not take long to realize what amazing and dedicated advocates they were for the marginalized people of Gujarat, and how many personal sacrifices they have made to provide support to the Maldhari people. Yet it wasn’t until I returned to India in 2006 that I finally learned the full extent of the hardships and perseverance that

make up the amazing story of Lalji’s life.

Lalji is the eldest son of a Maldhari family. The Maldhari have been forced to migrate, as their traditional grazing lands are increasingly privatized for development and they must move on continually in search of fresh grazing areas for their livestock. In Gujarat, three of the five million Maldhari are forced into a nomadic lifestyle. Lalji’s family were fortunate enough to purchase land and therefore had more stability and security of income. In addition, Lalji’s parents were dedicated to their children’s education.

While primary school is free in India, after the age of nine students must pay fees. So from age nine to age 17, Lalji rose before dawn every day, milked cows, carried 20 litres of milk on his head for 4½ kilometers to the village to sell, walked home to prepare for school, walked back to the village, walked home again, and then repeated the milk delivery in the evening.

In 1986 a drought wiped out the family’s herd of cows and buffalo, forcing them to move to the slums of Ahmedabad in search of work. The room the family shared had a sewer running through its middle which would overflow during the monsoon season, rendering it uninhabitable and forcing them onto the street. During this time, Lalji worked in a textile factory, making 10 Rps per day.

Luckily, an uncle was able to give the family a buffalo as a source of additional income. The animal of course required fodder, so after working a full day at the mill, Lalji would then spend four to six hours scavenging to feed the buffalo.

With amazing perseverance, Lalji managed to finish his college education in his early twenties and achieve a position with the Aga Khan Rural Support Program. There Lalji met



Neeta Pandya, and together they saw a gap in the development programs for nomadic Maldhari. In response, Lalji and Neeta founded MARAG (Maldhari Rural Action Group) to bring a voice to the nomadic Maldhari and other marginalized communities in Gujarat. Over the last fifteen years, MARAG has grown to over 50 staff members, of whom half come from the Maldhari communities they serve.

It is traditional within the Maldhari community to be married at a very young age. During the reign of the Moghul kings a law required all newly married women to first sleep with the king; the community decided to marry their children very early in order to forestall this practice. Sadly this tradition continues, and Lalji’s parents arranged for him to be married at the age of nine. (It took Lalji 18 years and over 80,000 rupees to obtain a divorce in order to marry Neeta).

Lalji has made many additional sacrifices and efforts to support those in need in Gujarat. When the 2001 earthquake hit the Kutch region of India, Lalji left his job and recruited 100 other volunteers to provide relief support. His friends helped by making sure there was food on the table for Lalji, Neeta and their son Siddhant, who was then four. They lived in a tent for six months while Lalji worked on the relief efforts.

When conflict reputed between Hindu fundamentalists and Muslims, Lalji became a public human rights

huts and the most essential things that they are missing, including books and school supplies.

You should note that this is not all that we are doing. We arranged to send a medical team from Pune who attended to the medical problems in the immediate aftermath of the floods. The funds for medicines and medical help were raised separately.

Our request to CIVA is confined to an absolute minimum that we require to put our project back on its feet. Education is the hope for these children and we do not want the lamp of hope that we lit so many years ago to be extinguished simply because a river changed its course.

We would very much appreciate an early response since time is of essence.

Sincerely,  
Sudha Varde, Trustee  
Rashtra Seva Dal

We are proud to report that CIVA was able to send RSD the full amount they requested. We wish them the best of luck in this impossibly difficult time, and hope for some heartwarming stories in their report for 2009.

ASHA also contacted us with a request for immediate help to deal with the catastrophic effects of flooding in the poor state of Orissa. They reported:

The Orissa state in India has experienced an unprecedented flood disaster caused by heavy rains. The flood hit more than 6 million people and has indirectly affected more than 10 million villagers. Swollen rivers have wrought havoc in 19 out of 30 districts. For one week millions people have been marooned. Roads, railways, and telecommunication have been cut off. People have taken shelter on highways and rooftops without food, water, medicine, or tents. Old persons and children are the most vulnerable. 80,000 people marooned by flood water need rescue and relief. More than 133,000 houses have collapsed and washed away. River embankments have broken in 170 places, more than 70 persons have died, and large numbers of animals have died or been washed away. Now the worst sufferers are women, especially those pregnant or lactating; children and old persons need special rescue and rehabilitation supports.

ASHA asked CIVA to take up a urgent sustainable rehabilitation programme to help rebuild economic conditions, as well as to help restore social life to the affected people.

The objectives laid out by ASHA were:

- To enable 300 most flood affected families to restore their income and economy through rehabilitation activities.
- To enable 400 children to resume their regular study in schools.
- To enable 300 women and adult girls to resume their normal social life.

They proposed the following activities to achieve these objectives:

- House reconstruction for 300 families through food for work.
- Crop production for 300 families by seeds supply.
- Schooling children by study material and dress supply for 400 children.
- Resuming normal social life for women, young ladies, old, and disabled persons through cloth supply for 300 persons.
- Improving the health of villagers through health checkup camps.
- Enabling the affected villagers to link and to access government rehabilitation schemes.
- Disaster management training for community leaders.

We are pleased to report that we were able to send ASHA the full amount requested (approximately CAN \$10,000). ASHA has received the funds and already begun to tackle the inordinate challenge of helping to rebuild the lives of these Indian villagers. □

## Field Report

by Ashok Kotwal

**M**ansur had prayed many times that Kosi Maa would one night sneak in and carry him gently on her shoulders to the sea—so he would no longer have to watch the miserable faces of his hungry children. He thought that at long last Kosi Maa had heard his prayers, as the river broke through the embankments and advanced toward his village. She was by no means gentle.

On the night of August 18th, the river picked up an old channel it had abandoned over a century ago. As the river changed its course, four million

people were driven from their homes, 250,000 acres of farmland were destroyed, 1000 villages were flooded, 914,000 people were evacuated, and the death toll rose to 530. The entire area looked like a lake 125 kms long and 25 km wide. Bihar, the poorest of Indian states, had to face a disaster that it was the least equipped to cope with.

Unlike the *tsunami* a few years which brought forth an enormous and prompt response world-wide, the Kosi river floods went almost unnoticed in the international press. With little response from the world community, resource-strapped Bihar desperately sought help from all quarters. Several civic organizations responded, one of them RSD (Rashtra Seva Dal)—an organization that has been working in the now-flooded area since 1993.

RSD workers are in Bihar in full force trying to do their part in helping the community to put their lives back together. They have sent medical teams, workers to rebuild houses and schools, and materials to replace the lost belongings of the flood victims. They are determined to ensure that the education long denied to the children of farm workers will resume, and that the vicious cycle that keeps the farm workers’ children following their destitute parents’ path will be broken.

Mansur and his family were saved by the villagers, who were organized by Almuddin—a local who is now a full-time RSD worker. But his family, and hundreds of such families, are still waiting in make-shift plastic shelters for help that would allow them to resume their lives. Rashtra Seva Dal is trying its best to get them such help. □



# Chairperson's Report

by Sophie Low-Beer

In the tradition of having the Chair reflect upon the previous year and try to say something both clever and insightful, I looked over the minutes of last year's AGM and noted several things from Ashok Kotwal's inspiring and heartfelt report. Ashok mostly spoke about how we had had a tough year, but that at some point we came together and made the decision to start spending more money in order to renew the morale of the Board, which in turn would inspire us to fundraise and to recruit some new Board members. I am happy to report that we did succeed in all these areas: we spent money, we fundraised, and we recruited two new Board members. But I am most pleased by a more subtle victory, which is that we seem to have risen to the difficult challenge of reviving and breathing fresh air into this organization and that, surely, regardless of how the numbers stack up, that is what truly makes the last year a success.

Let me expand on our spending: As per our 2007 financial statements, we spent a total of \$130,856 on projects. The bulk of these funds went to chirag, marag and Rashtra Seva Dal, with smaller sums sent to Seva Mandir, Fertile Ground, FERRY, Pragati Abhiyan, and Swanirvar. Our commitments this year, so far, are to CHIRAG, Seva Mandir, and FERRY; at our last meeting we approved additional funds for Pragati Abhiyan and Swanirvar.

More important than the sending of funds has been a renewed sense of excitement about our work in India. This enthusiasm stemmed from taking on a new partner, Swanirvar, and really expanding our relationships with last year's newcomers, Pragati Abhiyan and Rashtra Seva Dal.

In addition, this past year has been notable for significant visits by individuals from our partner organizations: Abhijit Gupta from FERRY, Milind Murugkar and Ashwini Kulkarni from Pragati Abhiyan, and Lalji Desai from MARAG. These opportunities to talk



Sophie Low-Beer with Drew Stewart and their new daughter Ella

with our partners face to face were invaluable, and the fact that CIVA feels stronger today than a year ago has much to do with these inspiring visits from those doing the real work on the ground.

To turn from the spending of money to the raising of money: last year was somewhat successful in terms of fundraising. I say somewhat because I think we could have done more. Our one official event didn't actually raise much in terms of funds, but it was successful in bringing the board closer together and closer to the work we do; it made one of our partners in India feel welcome, and gave our donors here a real sense of where their money goes. Most importantly, it brought us two very qualified new Board members: Anne Murphy and John Harriss (see below).

In other fundraising news, what deserves mention and high praise is the \$3,000 that Cathy raised with friends at a fundraiser for MARAG; and what should make us all excited and enthusiastic about future fundraising opportunities were the unsolicited funds that came from Vani's art exhibit in Toronto (about \$3,000) and Mireille

Silcoff's wedding (about \$1,000; see page 6).

I have mentioned two of the challenges Ashok set out for us last year—both spending money and raising money—and to end I want to touch briefly on the last challenge: reviving our Board. We have been fortunate to attract two new board members, but we have also lost two valuable members: Eleanor Stacey and Hashim Mitha. We thank them for all their hard work, and hope that they will remain strong supporters of CIVA.

Finally, I hope that next year at this time the Chair will be able to look back on this upcoming year and report that CIVA continued in an upwards direction: that we held a successful fundraiser; that we supported more new innovative projects in India, and continued to strengthen our ties with our old trustworthy partners; and that CIVA meetings remained fun and filled with a sense that we are accomplishing something important in a wonderful country that we all care deeply about.

Thank you.

most of the 200 students in Aple Ghar and all the teachers participated. Group songs and dances including one urging the Rain God to hurry up. It was totally amazing to me that children with almost no belongings, orphaned or abandoned by their parents, could have such joy on their faces. The caretakers at Aple Ghar are also mostly chosen from amongst abandoned or abused women and widows.

It seems to take so little to make some people happy, and so little to make some others miserable. The happy faces did give me a feeling that something worthwhile was being done in this place. They have a staff of well-motivated and skilled people who care deeply about their mission. They have sensible ideas about supplementing their meagre resources.

My fear is that with the incredibly low compensation (Rs. 4000 a month) offered by Aple Ghar, their best people will leave. They need to make greater efforts to raise funds so that these very worthwhile operations can continue.

CIVA funds have been used for what was promised, but implementation has been slower than expected—partly because many activities await the beginning of the rainy season. It would be good to ask for a yearly report in November.

Then, as we headed back to catch the night train to Mumbai, suddenly the skies opened up and then there was a deluge. The elephant God in the sky had heard the children's prayer! While I fretted about getting drenched, the people danced around me, shouting with joy. □



## Our First Night in Kolkata

Our first night in Kolkata began in Chennai. We are two Canadians, a physician (Sophie) and a rock and roll musician (Drew), visiting India on behalf of CIVA. Kolkata was to be our stepping off point to visit an the Indian NGO FERRY and observe their West Bengali projects in Ram-purhat and Khanyan.

We arrived in Chennai after seeing other projects on the outskirts of Udai-pur, rural development efforts within small villages of Uttaranchal, and aid given to tsunami-affected children in Tamil Nadu. We were disappointed but not surprised to find that our flight had a seven-hour fog delay. So we arrived in Kolkata at midnight, greatly in need of a good night's sleep. Unfortunately our taxi driver was having difficulty finding our reserved room in Chowringhee. Fortunately we obtained the services of an English-speaking homeless man with an encyclopedic knowledge of the local hotel situation, who hopped into our taxi and showed us the way.

It was now 2:00 a.m. as our taxi driver and the homeless man called for the doorman. It quickly became evident that our extreme tardiness had led the sleepy hotel manager to give up our room. Our team reassembled and went through the empty streets of Chowringhee from hotel to guesthouse, always receiving the same response: "Full, sir, full!" Just as we were considering sleeping on the station platform at Howrah, a blue police van appeared. Three policemen—one of whom we later learnt to be sub-inspector Antindra Mandal of Park St. Police Station—set immediately to the seemingly impossible task of finding us a room. Mr. Mandal summoned two more officers by radio, who arrived on motorcycles and were sent off in search of a room, any room. Meanwhile, with the help of our guidebook, sub-inspector Mandal systematically called every potential hostel, guesthouse, and fivestar hotel listed. We attempted to re-



main optimistic, joking that "Even the moon is full!" After all phone calls proven unsuccessful, our motorcycle reconnaissance duo returned with more bad news. It was now 3:30 a.m. and more than probable that we would have to spend the night on the streets of Kolkata. We expected our helpful group of five officers, a taxi driver, and a homeless man to disband and leave us to our own devices when sub-inspector Mandal suggested, albeit very hesitantly, that there was a small room at Park St. Station where we could sleep until morning. Ecstatic, we accepted immediately.

A motorcade convoy of police van, motorcycles, and taxi arrived at Park St. Station's door. Exhausted beyond emotion, we were helped with our bags and welcomed by the other officers performing their night shift duties. We were led down the hall to a room with a green astroturf wall-to-wall carpet, a blue-black ceiling painted with silver stars and moon, and a mural covering all four walls depicting scenes from the Disney adaptation of Kipling's *Jungle Book*. The surreal moment and our tired minds led us to accept this bizarre accommodation without question.

We slept a fitful night on police-sanctioned bamboo mats, awoken periodically by the sounds of arrests and resulting discussions. After maybe three hours of interrupted sleep, we were advised it was time for *chai* and buttered toast. We quickly packed our bags, bade Mowgli goodbye, and joined the officers for morning tea and another day in awful, wonderful, unpredictable India. □

—Drew Stewart  
& Sophie Low-Beer

## Aple Ghar

*CIVA Co-Chair Ashok Katwal, who is on sabbatical leave this year from his post at the University of British Columbia, sent us this report by e-mail on July 24, 2008.*

Aple Ghar (which means 'Our Home' in Marathi) is an orphanage built by Rashtra Seva Dal to house victims of the Latur earthquake. Now that its original inhabitants have grown up and gone, it continues to look after orphans and abandoned children nearby. There is a school all the way through the tenth standard attached to the orphanage, which accepts other students from the neighbouring area.

Yesterday my sister Sudha and I visited Aple Ghar, and I thought I should write a report before my memory fades. We took the Siddheshwar Express from Mumbai to Solapur, where a Rashtra Seva Dal car picked us up, and within two hours we were in Naldurg. There is a twelfth century fort right next to the site of Aple Ghar from which the village derives its name. The dryness of the terrain we drove through was striking: given that there is almost no industrial activity around, this arid agricultural area offers nothing but unending poverty.

This situation has been made much worse this year by the fact that it is the end of July and there has not been a drop of rain. The gloom is palpable. It shows on peoples' faces; it surfaces in every conversation; it is in the songs people choose to sing. At the end of the day, the kids at Aple Ghar feted us through some haunting group songs; in the one that resonated most with the crowd they pleaded with 'Abhalacha Hathi' (the elephant guardian of the sky) to drop water on the parched earth.

Aple Ghar has grown since I first visited in 1999. A new building houses practical training workshops: sewing machines, computer training, arts and music. Interestingly, in this changing economy, music and drawing are regarded as employment skills. The sewing workshop also saves the students of Aple Ghar money by enabling them to make their own clothes. I was impressed by the sewing teacher who, in addition to being articulate seemed to have a good grasp of the practical as-

pects of the life here and the tradeoffs involved. The music teacher is creative and hugely talented and, if he ever realizes his potential, will depart for greener pastures.

The proposal Aple Ghar submitted to us sought to develop the land around the site for boosting domestic food production (milk, vegetables, fruit, etc). I could appreciate the importance of this idea only after I reviewed the situation with the management there. Their government grant is totally inadequate for anything beyond feeding the kids. There is no funding for training; the only way they can generate money for such activities is by lowering food costs.

Amazingly, while the government specifies complex guidelines as how the diet offered to the kids must include milk or eggs or meat, the grant is barely adequate to fulfill these stipulations. As food prices in this area are prohibitively high, management has tried to resolve this through home production.

Some of the proposed work has already been done. The barren slope of the hill has been planted with fruit trees, and trenches dug at regular intervals to capture the water running down the slope. Typically, the trees with deep roots are chosen. Neatly laid out vegetable plots are fed by an elaborate system of drip irrigation. All cultivation is being done using organic farming methods, the finer points of which are propagated through training camps for farmers. Two such camps have already taken place, and more are planned.

The shed under which nursery plots are cultivated has been rebuilt. The nursery for chili pepper plants has experienced a brisk demand and is likely to become a good revenue generator. Similarly, the vermiculture site is well looked after and generates demand from the local farmers. Aple Ghar management seems to be deeply sensitive to ecological considerations: all waste from the orphanage kitchen and animal dung is used for generating bio-gas that in turn is used for cooking.

One area where Aple Ghar has not enjoyed success is in its dairy department. Only two of their four provide any milk. CIV's funding includes a provision for replacing unproductive cows,

but any decision has been postponed since if the drought continues the shortage of cattle feed will put a serious dent in their dairy project. Aple Ghar management has taken a few precautionary measures, including devoting some land to a special grass (Napier Grass) which serves as an effective cattle feed.

I spent a very interesting afternoon session with the management committee, focussed on how to reduce dependence on donors. Government grants are for bare bones necessities, and if that is all this NGO can aspire to, its best people will leave. It is very important to this young group that they create something special they can be proud of at Aple Ghar. Indeed, I could see that some could have far more lucrative opportunities elsewhere. They stay on because of the aspirations they have for this place and the camaraderie they have developed.

Conceptually speaking, their ideas revolved around extending the scale of operations that they are already engaged in and generating revenue by selling the extra products. For example, they are already developing some expertise in organic farming while teaching their own students and producing their own food; they would like to sell this to the farmers nearby.

Similarly, they would like to sell more nursery plants, sell the comforters stitched in the sewing workshop, and run music classes. There were suggestions that tourist traffic to the nearby fort might be exploited by staging an exhibition by the art teacher related to the history of the region.

All these are sensible ideas and will be helpful in generating some revenue, but I remain sceptical about whether they can obviate the need for shoring up their corpus endowment through establishing a regular network of local donors. On this trip, I have developed a growing feeling that it is unrealistic for us to expect that NGOs providing services to the poor become financially independent and sustainable. There are limits to which they can recover the costs from their clients, and the only realistic alternative is to develop local donors.

In the evening we enjoyed a really heart-warming ceremony in which

## New Directors

### Anne Murphy



Anne Murphy is Assistant Professor and Chair of Punjabi Language, Literature, and Sikh Studies at the University of British Columbia. She received her Ph.D. in 2005 from Columbia University's Department of Religion, and her Master's degree in Asian Languages and Literature from the University of Washington. Her research interests focus on the historical formation of religious communities in Punjab and northern South Asia, with particular but not exclusive attention to the Sikh tradition.

Her current book project, based upon her dissertation, focuses on the construction of Sikh memory and historical consciousness around material representations from the eighteenth century to the present. Other research interests concern the formation of selfhood around memory and history, and around social service, or "seva," within Sikh and other South Asian religious traditions.

Prior to and while pursuing her academic career, Dr. Murphy has been active in the fields of pre-collegiate education, museum education, publishing and research. She has taught in the New York City Public School system and is a New York State certified teacher of the elementary grades,

social studies, and English as a second language. After completing her Master's degree at the University of Washington, she ran school and teacher programs for the Seattle Art Museum.

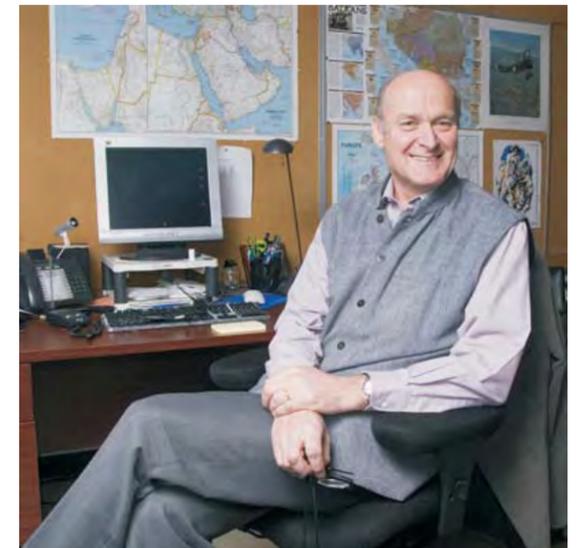
In addition to these salaried positions, Murphy has extensive experience in the fields of research, education, and publishing in a freelance capacity. She has acted an independent research consultant for the Ford Foundation, assessing and planning international funding initiatives in relation to religion. She also developed and taught an introductory class on Hindi and South Asian culture to at-risk inner city high school students in the summer of 2000 as a part of the Urban Scholars program at the University of Massachusetts. Students in the course conducted site visits at museum and religious sites (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh) and completed Web projects on South Asian religious communities in the Boston area.

### John Harriss

John Harriss came to Vancouver from England a couple of years ago, to take up a job as the Director of the new School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University. He has done most of his research as a social anthropologist in India, having visited the country first, nearly forty years ago, as a mountaineer.

He was a member of the 1969 Cambridge Kishtwar Expedition, which aimed to climb a peak called Brammah in the Kishtwar Himal in Kashmir. The attempt failed, and the mountain was first scaled a few years by the very famous climber Chris Bonnington with the late Nick Estcourt.

But John takes great pride in the fact that the map of the Kishtwar Himal in the *Lonely Planet* guide to Kashmir is copied from one that he drew.



He went back to India three years later, as a graduate student, to do research on the social impact of the green revolution, in the course of which he lived for a year in a village in the northern part of the state of Tamil Nadu. He has been back to Tamil Nadu on many subsequent occasions, looking upon Chennai-that-is-Madras as a kind of second home. His daughter Kaveri was born in the city of Coimbatore, in Tamilnad.

John has been an academic for most of his life, in Cambridge, at the University of East Anglia, and, before SFU, at the London School of Economics. But he also spent three years in the mid-1990s as the Head of the Regional Office for South and Central Asia of the Save the Children Fund (UK), living in Kathmandu but traveling extensively all over South Asia.

High points of that very rich passage in his life were travels visiting projects in Ladakh, Garhwal and coastal Andhra ... as well as an almost too exciting journey into parts of Sri Lanka held by the LTTE.

John and his wife Gundi are now happily settled on Vancouver's North Shore, but steal away for some periods each year, back to Chennai.

## Giving Over Gifts: Creating A CIVA Wedding Fund

by Mireille Silcoff

At the center of the seeming billions of obligations within the traditions of Judaism is the concept of *tzedakah*—what might be called the heavyweight of all Jewish requirements. The word is often translated into English as “charity,” but in its original Hebrew, its meaning skews more towards “justice”—a force that evens out.

It was once the norm for any Jewish couple marrying to perform acts of *tzedakah* in order to put a sacred seal on their union. Rich or poor, rural or city folk, secular or religious, if you were getting married, you gave.

My boyfriend Mike and I had been together for ten years when we decided to have a wedding. As soon as we’d made the announcement, things started arriving in the mail. Vases. Tea sets. More vases. A flame-orange lacquer Italian espresso maker.

We were grateful for the generosity of our family and friends, but we thought it might be a good idea to try redirecting it a bit. We had full cupboards, but as a couple, we were a little behind in our giving. So we asked our wedding guests to help us in the matter. We set up a wedding fund with CIVA.

There’s so much awfulness on the cultural landscape having to do with weddings these days—TV shows devoted to bridezillas having hissy fits and movies about grooms going broke for the dream engagement ring. Mike and I chose to see our wedding as an opportunity for raising money instead of bleeding money. We asked guests to give to CIVA instead of giving to us; or rather, we intimated that giving to the charity would be the very best way to give to us.

Setting up the wedding fund with CIVA only took a few minutes. It was the right organization for the job—quick, nimble, no-frills, with no middle people and a policy of direct, uncomplicated giving. When a few guests asked where their donations would end up, we could assure them with confidence that donations were

going right to the Indian villages where help was most needed (and not, say, to office costs or ad campaigns).

There were also guests who’d asked why we’d chosen to open a fund with CIVA, when neither Mike nor I had ever been to India. Some of our more traditional Jewish friends wondered why we hadn’t chosen a Jewish charity. The answer goes back to the bones of *tzedakah*—the “highest” forms of which involve giving to unknown recipients (and the “lowest” forms of which involve things like chiseling your name onto the side of the hospital your family uses).

The idea of the money we may have raised landing halfway across the planet, in a place so foreign to us, seemed to embody the notion of “a force that evens out.” It helped make our wedding day feel incredibly special. □

*Mireille Silcoff is editor-in-chief of Guilt & Pleasure Quarterly, a review of new Jewish writing and ideas, and a lead columnist for the National Post.*



## Dr. Abhijit Gupta visits Vancouver

We would like to give a big thank you to everyone who attended our speaking event at UBC’s Choi Centre this past June, where Dr. Abhijit Gupta gave a talk explaining the work done by FERRY (Foundation for Economic Rehabilitation of Rural Youth) in West Bengal.

It is a rare pleasure to greet and meet a representative of an Indian partners here in Vancouver. Abhijit’s excellent presentation explaining FERRY’s philosophy, mandate, and programs to address the migration of jobless rural youth to overcrowded cities, was both insightful and inspirational. The event was well attended and everyone enjoyed a delicious spread of Indian fare. Look for another CIVA-sponsored event this summer! —Drew Stewart

*Above:  
Mireille and Mike at their wedding*

*At left:  
Dr. Abhijit Gupta soaks up some Canadian culture with CIVA board member Drew Stewart*

## Field Reports

### Seva Mandir

by Sarah McAlpine

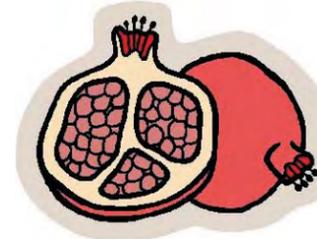
In March of, 2006 CIVA began a new Rural Health and Sanitation Project with Seva Mandir. Its overall goal is improvement of women’s lives through constructing sanitation structures, while simultaneously raising awareness of hygiene issues. Long-term goals include reduced health risks, greater empowerment of women, and a cleaner environment.

There was a significant demand for sanitation in several villages where Seva Mandir works. The villages chosen were the ones where women’s groups of a certain number existed, where there was a willingness to contribute 40% of the project, and where women would take responsibility for implementation. Tribal and poor communities were given preference. In the past, leadership training programs had been held for women and this project allowed them to practice the management skills they had learned. In two villages of Jhadol Block, 144 toilets and bathrooms were built, as well as a water harvesting tank. The women took full responsibility and, with the help of two hired masons, completed the tasks in the scheduled time period. In Kotra 77 bathrooms were built in three villages where women provided the management, sand, stones and labour.

The entire process has not only improved women’s management skills and their awareness of sanitation, but has given them recognition in their own community. Households have attained higher standards of personal hygiene and reduced risk of reproductive illnesses, gynecological problems, and other diseases. The risk to the general population of water-borne disease will drop significantly, with savings on medical expenses and a reduction in loss of wages due to sickness. Women now will not have to wait for dawn or dusk to relieve themselves, and the unpleasantness and danger posed to women from bathing in public will be lessened. □

### Pragati Abhiyan

by Ashwini Kulkarni



Prakash Ahire cursed the day he decided to devote three acres of his land to growing pomegranates. He had imagined that he could earn a decent living by selling his fruit to KPC Exports, retire his debts, and live a life that he deserved.

Indeed, the first year that the trees bore fruit was not bad. Pomegranates actually gave him some income—unlike Jowar that gave him his staple while for extra cash the family had to hustle at odd jobs that came along. In this dryland area, all farmers had to simply get used to poverty. Bapusaheb was the first to experiment, and a few villagers followed suit. Suddenly there was hope that one could climb out of poverty even in this arid area. But the second year was not as good as the first, and the third year was a disaster. A deadly disease made inroads into the area and soon spread across the village like fire. Whole trees started dying. Prakash sought advice from friends and relatives, but they too were struggling to save their trees.

Prakash walked into the room quite despondently. His friend Heramb had insisted he try this workshop organized by Pragati Abhiyan. “They know our problems. They speak our language. Even their experts talk like farmers, unlike the profs in the Krishi University!” Prakash was skeptical, and came to the workshop out of his respect for Heramb. But once the programme started he became deeply engaged. The speaker seemed to have deep knowledge of the subject. There followed an interactive session in which he and other participants could ask all the questions they had. They could discuss among themselves the various experiments they had attempted. Soon he wished he had taken this workshop earlier.

He asked the speaker about the way his plants were dying, with no apparent disease, and so which pesticide to apply? He gave a list of what he had already tried. The speaker told him the reasons were multiple, so the treatment he had been applying was inadequate to address all the possible causes. Then he elaborately described another treatment—one which did not require further pesticides, but rather a different kind of cultivation practices, water management, and fertilizer application. He asked Prakash to give this trial treatment to only 5–10 of the plants affected.

Prakash went home feeling a little better. He started applying the three week treatment as was suggested in the workshop. And after three and a half to four weeks he could see that the plants were putting out new leaves! This meant that the plants had rejuvenated. This year he would not be able to harvest fruit, but he is hopeful that the plants would give a good yield in the next harvesting season.

Pragati Abhiyan is a Civil Society Organisation, based in Nashik, working on rural development programmes. With support from CIVA, we have started working with small dry land farmers growing pomegranates. Speakers are invited from different fields: scientists from the Agriculture University, private traders to tell the farmers about market trends, scientists/consultants in the private sector, and other progressive farmers with long years of success in growing high quality pomegranates.

Workshops are held periodically for farmer groups in three locations: one in Satana block of Nashik district, in Sangamner block of Ahmednagar district, and in Mohol block of Solapur district. To evaluate the impact of this effort, Pragati Abhiyan plans to do a comparative survey of the farmers who participated in the workshops and those who did not. In this area, long accustomed to accepting acute poverty, Pragati Abhiyan is making valiant efforts to transform the collective mind set through dispensing scientific knowledge of immense practical value. □