

# humanist outlook

Vol. 11 No.2  
Winter 2005

---

*for the furtherance of human values  
through an ethics based on human  
perceptions and capabilities*

published every quarter in  
spring, summer, autumn and winter

---

## CONTENTS

<b>Editorial: Humanism and the Hereafter</b>		43
<b>Intellectual Treason</b>	<i>Meera Nanda</i>	45
<b>Problems of Nuclear Energy</b>	<i>Vir Narain</i>	53
<b>Democracy and the Media</b>	<i>Vishwa Mohan Tiwari</i>	56
<b>Ancient Indian Wisdom</b>	<i>Ramendra</i>	59
<b>Female Foeticide in India</b>	<i>Indu Grewal and J. Kishore</i>	61
<b>A Letter to Humanist Friends in India and Abroad</b>	<i>Prakash Narain</i>	66
<b>News and Notes</b>		67
-New Chairman for IHU		
-Annual Day of IHU		
-The Promise and Perils of Nuclear Energy		
-Sharia's Courts and Fatwas in India		
<b>Letters</b>		70
- A letter to Humanist Friends in India and Abroad	<i>Levi Fragell</i>	*
- Humanism in the Contemporary World	<i>Prakash Narain</i>	

## PARIS DECLARATION : JULY 2005

*The 16th World Humanist Congress, held in Paris from 5th to 7th July 2005 to commemorate the Centenary of the French Law of Separation of Church and State of 9 December 1905, unanimously adopted the following resolution.*

Inspired by the heritage of the North American Revolution, by the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America (1791), and by the Mexican Revolution, this French law was an achievement of the process of secularisation initiated by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution so as to put human beings at the core of their own destiny.

Everywhere, on every continent, and for centuries, Humanists have been, and are working for the triumph of the freedom of conscience. Freedom of conscience is the fundamental basis of Human emancipation and cannot be dissociated from the struggle for democratic liberties. "Man is the measure of all things" Protagoras said thousands of years ago in ancient Greece, the founding fatherland of the notion of citizenship. In ancient India, 600 years before the common era, this humanist principle was already asserted by the ancient Carvakas (in summary): "Ethics is a phenomenon of nature. It is a social convention, a convenience not a divine command. It is not necessary at all to control instincts and feelings. They are orders of nature. The aim of life is to live, and happiness remains the only wisdom".

The sense of being human is his or her consciousness – and the freedom to use it. No economic, religious, cultural or political constraints have any legitimate basis to prohibit or limit human freedom of conscience.

There can be no freedom of conscience when religions rule societies. Secularism is the demand for equal rights for those who belong to any religion as well as for those who belong to none. Humanists have always supported actions aimed at building secularism in society and its institutions by demanding this principle of equality for believers and non-believers alike.

For IHEU and its member organizations, the State must be secular, that is, neither religious nor atheist. But demanding genuine democratic equality, recognized by the Law, between believers and humanists does not mean that the member associations of IHEU treat all philosophical points of view equally. We have no duty to respect irrationalism, however ancient its origins. True Humanism is the flourishing of freedom of conscience and the methods of free inquiry.

The achievement of the same rights for all is a step towards secularization and the Separation of Religion and State is a pre-requisite. Secular safeguards must be not merely legal but constitutional – without constitutional safeguards how can we guarantee equal freedom of conscience for all? A law lacking constitutional safeguards could easily be overturned by a simple majority in the legislature. That is why, everywhere in the world, IHEU demands constitutional Separation of Religion and State. It lights the way of peoples and countries everywhere. The history of every people, of every nation, is different by nature. There are countries, like the USA, where the State is secular but society is not. In France, with the 1905 law, the State and the school system are secular, and citizens have a real freedom of conscience. There are as many histories as there are countries.

For IHEU, every path, for all people and nations, must lead to the achievement of the Separation of Religion and State. Every secular gain must be preserved, defended and widened for this purpose. For this reason the 16th World Congress of IHEU held in Paris decided to make the Separation of Religion and State its main international focus. The 16th World Congress, held at UNESCO headquarters and at the Sorbonne University of Paris – two venues which have witnessed historical events in the struggle for the achievements of enlightened humanism – vows to fight for genuine Separation of Religion and State everywhere in the world.

## EDITORIAL

### Humanism and the Hereafter

It seems that primitive man, everywhere and in every culture, had an instinctive belief in some sort of existence after death. For the primitive psyche perhaps there was no other way to come to terms with the dread and mystery of death. As the traditional religions evolved, elaborate myths were created, claiming that every man had an immortal soul that survived his bodily death. In a master-stroke (deliberate or otherwise) traditional religions linked the fate of this immortal soul with good behaviour in this life. Ordinary people, conditioned as they were from early childhood to adapt to regimes of earthly reward and punishment, readily accepted this vastly magnified scheme of reward and punishment that extended into eternity. Morality, which really had its roots in human nature, became a prisoner of reward and punishment. 'RAP morality' is perhaps a good name for it. RAP morality gave religion an iron grip on the lives of people. As Sam Harris says in his outstanding book, *The End of Faith*: "Without death, the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable. Clearly, the fact of death is unbearable to us, and faith is little more than a shadow cast by our hope for a better life beyond the grave."

Unspeakable atrocities were committed by the medieval Christian church in the name of saving souls. Russell tells us that "*The Spaniards in Mexico and Peru used to baptize Indian infants and then immediately dash their brains out; by this means they secured these infants went to heaven..*" and goes on: "*In countless ways the doctrine of personal immortality in its Christian form has had disastrous effects upon morals...*" The horrors of the Inquisition are too gruesome to describe. In our own time we have the phenomenon, in the Iran-Iraq war, of children being used for clearing minefields. They, and their parents as well as the commanders who let them get blown up, evidently believed that ample rewards awaited these children in paradise. (It must, however, be mentioned that reliable firsthand accounts of the use of children in human wave attacks are rare.) Suicide bombings are an everyday occurrence in Palestine and Iraq. So problems arising out of a belief in life after death are very contemporary and very real. And the tragic growth of suicide bombings has given them a wholly unexpected twist. How differently William Empson's *Ignorance of Death* reads today!

*Heaven me, when a man is ready to die about something  
Other than himself, and is in fact ready because of that,  
Not because of himself, that is something clear about himself.  
Otherwise I feel very blank upon this topic,  
And think that though important, and proper for anyone to bring up,  
It is one that most people should be prepared to be blank upon.*

In most Humanist statements, there does not seem to be a pointed reference to the issue of life after death. This could be because the Humanist rejection of the supernatural also entails the rejection of the idea of an immortal soul or life after death. However, the Memorandum of Association of the Indian Humanist Union (June 12, 1960) does state: *“Though Humanism is not identified with any views about the factual question of life after death, it does not accept the goal of salvation. It is content to fix its attention on this life and this world. It is concerned with the preservation and furtherance of moral values in all relations and spheres of life, and with the building up of a better and happier human community.”* Narsingh Narain has elaborated this further: *“...there is no need for us, as Humanists, to consider the evidence for and against human survival. For whether we survive or not makes no difference to our practical ideals. Moreover, the craving for a future life is unhealthy, if only for the simple reason that our wishes can make no difference to whatever the fact may happen to be. Belief in a future life was not based on evidence. It was an expression of faith arising out of a certain mental background. The important thing is to outgrow that mental outlook, not to disprove survival, or to rule out faith altogether.”*

The problem is that, while this position will be seen by Humanists as being eminently logical and pragmatic, it will do nothing to induce the ordinary believer in traditional religions (to whom life after death is a fact) to re-examine his world-view. The Humanist Movement came into being to provide an alternative to traditional religions, and its main task is to address the major factors which have given traditional religions such a grip on their adherents. Of these, the two most powerful factors are: belief in a personal God; and life after death. Sam Harris is right when he says: *“What one believes happens after death dictates much of what one believes about life, and this is why faith-based religion, in presuming to fill the blanks in our knowledge of the hereafter, does such heavy lifting for those who fall under its power.. A single proposition - you will not die - once believed, determines a response to life that would be otherwise unthinkable.”*

Humanism cannot afford to remain ‘blank’ (or agnostic) on this issue; just as it is not agnostic about a *personal* God. We must affirm that there is no scientific evidence for personal survival after death. However, death does not have to be equated with non-existence; although Hume (reportedly in a conversation) held that there is no more difficulty in conceiving my non-existence after death, than in conceiving my non-existence before birth, and no reason to be distressed by either. We can look upon our existence as being of two kinds: conscious, and consequential. While my conscious existence ceases with death, my consequential existence does not. This thought gives one responsibility and hope, and a sense of worth.

*Vir Narain*

## INTELLECTUAL TREASON

*Meera Nanda*

*Meera Nanda uncovers an extraordinary coalition that is undermining science*

The second-term election victory of George Bush - and India's own experience with Hindu nationalist BJP rule, off and on, through the last decade - captures a dangerous moment in world history. We are witnessing the world's first and the world's largest liberal constitutional democracies, officially committed to secularism, slide toward religious nationalism. By voting out the BJP and its allies in the last election, the Indian voters have halted this slide, at least for now - a heartening development, compared to the virtual take-over of America by Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists.

The question that interests me in this electoral route to faith-based governance is how this counter-revolution is actually accomplished, or to put it differently, how the spirit of secularism gets subverted, without any formal abrogation of secular laws. Unless we understand the ideological mechanism of this sacralisation of politics, we will not be able to combat the ongoing coups against secularism under nominally secular democracies.

As a student of the history and philosophy of science, I have been watching with concern how modern science itself — perhaps the single most powerful force for secularisation — is being re-coded as sacred, either as affirming the Bible or the Vedas, or as 'lower knowledge' of 'dead matter', in need of spiritualisation. As an old-time partisan of the Enlightenment and scientific temper, I have been watching with concern as my fellow intellectuals and activists, in the United States and India, who identify themselves with social justice, anti-imperialism, women's rights and sustainable development, have themselves paved the way for re-enchantment or re-sacralisation of science

Many of the Hindutva arguments for 'Vedic science' find a resonance with the fashionable theories of alternative sciences and postcolonial studies. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the impression that postmodernist and multiculturalist critics of modern science are re-discovering and restating many of the arguments Hindu nationalists have long used to assert the superior scientificity of Hindu sacred traditions.

George Orwell's doublethink bears an uncanny resemblance to the well-known Hindu tendency to eclectically combine contradictory ideas by

*Reprinted from New Humanist, Volume 120, No 1 by permission*

declaring them to be simply different paths or names of a shared enterprise, as is the case with the amorphous grab-bag of Hindu myths, mysticism and philosophy, known as ‘the Vedas’. Recall how double-think worked in 1984: Words came to mean their opposites: war meant peace, freedom was slavery, and ignorance strength. History was endlessly revised to make the present look like a confirmation of eternal, unchanging truths. Words, representations, facts ceased to mean what they appeared to be saying. Shorn of any definite and contestable meanings, words began to be used interchangeably, hybridised endlessly, without any fear of contradictions.

Under BJP rule, superstitions started getting described as science. Hindu nationalists started invoking science in just about every speech and policy statement. But while they uttered the word ‘science’ — which in today’s world is understood as modern science — they meant astrology, or vastu, or Vedic creationism, or transcendental meditation or ancient humoral theory of disease taught by Ayurveda. This was not just talk: state universities and colleges got big grants from the government to offer post-graduate degrees, including PhDs in astrology; research in vastu shastra, meditation, faith-healing, cow-urine and priest-craft was promoted with substantial injections of public money. Nearly every important discovery of modern science was read back into Hindu sacred books: explosion of nuclear energy became the awesome appearance of God in the Bhagvat Gita; the indeterminacy at quantum level served as confirmation of Vedanta; atomic charges became equivalent to negative, positive and neutral gunas, or moral qualities; the reliance of experience and reason in science became the same thing as reliance on mystical experience, and so on. Contemporary theories of physics, evolution and biology were wilfully distorted to make it look as if all of modern science was converging to affirm the New Age, mind-over-matter cosmology that follows from Vedantic monism. ‘Evidence’ from fringe sciences was used to support all kinds of superstitions, from vastu, astrology, ‘quantum healing’ to the latest theory of Vedic creationism. Science and ‘Vedas’ were treated as homologues, as just different names of the same thing. Orwell’s Big Brother would’ve felt right at home!

Another sign of doublespeak was this: On the one hand, the BJP and its allies presented themselves as great champions of science, as long as it could be absorbed into ‘the Vedas’, of course. On the other hand, they aggressively condemned the secular and naturalistic worldview of science — the disenchantment of nature — as ‘reductionist’, ‘Western’ or even ‘Semitic’ and therefore un-Hindu and un-Indian. Science yes, and technology yes, but a rational-materialist critique of Vedic idealism no — that became the mantra of Hindutva.

Why this over-eagerness to claim the support of science? There is a modernising impulse in all religions to make the supposedly timeless truths of

theology acceptable to the modern minds raised on a scientific sensibility. 'Scientific creationism' among Christian and Islamic fundamentalists is an example of this impulse. But while Christian fundamentalists in America indulge in creationism primarily to get past the constitutional requirement for a separation of church and state, in India it is motivated by ultra-nationalism, Hindu chauvinism and the nationalist urge to declare Hinduism's superiority as the religion of reason and natural law over Christianity and Islam, which are declared to be irrational and faith-based creeds. Contemporary Hindu nationalists are carrying on with the neo-Hindu tradition of proclaiming Hinduism as the universal religion of the future because of its superior 'holistic science' (as compared to the 'reductionist science' of the West.) Besides, it is easier to sell traditions and rituals, especially to urban, upwardly mobile men, if they have the blessings of English-speaking 'scientific' gurus

Granted, this business of Vedic science had been going on before anyone had ever heard the word 'postmodern'. But this Hindu nationalist appropriation of science has found new sources of intellectual respectability from the postmodernist, anti-Enlightenment turn taken by intellectuals, most radically in American universities, but also in India

What do I mean by postmodernism and how did it play out in India? Postmodernism encompasses a wide variety of theoretical discourses, touching on everything from literature and history to architecture. What unites them is a suspicion of universal knowledge. Modern science, being the ideal type of such knowledge, naturally became a target of postmodernist critics. Sure, there were many critics of this universal science, including prominent scientists themselves before the advent of postmodernism, but their criticisms were leveled at the abuses of science, not at its logic.

As disillusionment with the military-industrial complex grew in the West in the wake of the Vietnam war and civil rights struggles, the top-down model of development in India led to a radical critique of science, in which its claims to objectivity and universality were questioned. In India, well-known public intellectuals Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva, Shiv Vishvanathan, Claude Alvares and others condemned modern science as being innately barbaric, violent and even genocidal because of its reductionism and its imposition of western interests and values in collusion with westernised Indian elite. But the critique of science and technology that emerged out of the so-called 'Delhi school of science studies' was not limited to uses or abuses of science: it questioned the content and methodology of science as we know it.

No one can deny that there are alternative, culture-dependent descriptions of nature: the world is full of a vast variety of such descriptions.

Given this diversity, can we not say that modern science provides us a closer, a more approximate representation of nature which is more adequately supported by evidence and logic? Not so, according to its critics, because the standards of truth and falsity are also relative to the 'form of life' of a culture. To quote two leading theorists of the 'social constructivist' school: "the labels 'true' and 'false' are simply different names for cultural preferences." The grand conclusion of this school of thought is that all ways of knowing are at par because all are culturally embedded attempts to understand brute reality. There is only one reality, different cultures approach it differently, each of which is rational in its own context. (If you replace culture with caste in this statement, you get the golden rule of Hinduism that all paths to truth are different only in name)

Social constructivists do not deny that modern science has discovered some truths about nature that are universally valid — Newton's law of gravity for example. But even these universals are seen as products of the Judeo-Christian and masculine assumptions of Western cultures. To paraphrase Sandra Harding, one of the best known proponents of feminist standpoint epistemology, other cultures are capable of producing alternative universals of their own. Which culture's universals get universalised and which ones are consigned to the status of ethno-sciences, is not decided by superior explanatory power, but by superior political power. Well-known scholars including Andrew Ross and David Hess wrote books arguing that the line between accepted science and heterodox sciences of cultural minorities is an arbitrary construct reflecting cultural and ideological interests of those in power. Dipesh Chakrabarty, a subaltern historian, expressed the sentiment well when he wrote that "reason is but a dialect backed by an army."

Presenting India as source of alternative universals that could heal the reductionism of western science became the major preoccupation of Indian followers of science studies. Vandana Shiva wrote glowingly of Indian views of non-dualism as superior to western reductionism. Ashis Nandy declared astrology to be the science of the poor and the non-westernised masses in India.

Prayers to smallpox goddesses, menstrual taboos, Hindu nature ethics which derive from orthodox ideas about prakriti or shakti, and even the varna order were defended as rational (even superior) solutions to the cultural and ecological crises of modernity

All this fitted in very well with western feminist and ecologists' search for a kinder and gentler science. Prominent feminist theorists (led by Carolyn Merchant and Evelyn Keller) condemned the separation of the subject from the object as a sign of masculine and dualist Judeo-Christian thinking. The history



of modern science was rewritten to decry the progressive secularisation or disenchantment of nature as a source of oppression of nature and women. This naturally created an opening for eastern cultures, especially India, where such secularisation of nature is frowned upon by religious doctrines and cultural mores. In the recent literature on Hindu ecology, the most orthodox philosophies of Hinduism, including Advaita Vedanta, where vitalistic ideas of life-force (shakti, Brahman) are embodied in all species through the mechanism of karma and rebirth, began to be presented as more conducive to feminist and ecological politics. The deep investment of these philosophies in perpetuating superstitions and patriarchy in India was forgotten and forgiven.

The critics went further: They argued that if, in the final analysis, all representations of nature are cultural constructions, then different cultures and subcultures should be permitted to construct their own representation of nature. To judge other cultures from the vantage point of modern science, as the Enlightenment tradition demanded, amounted to an act of “epistemic violence” against the other, as Gayatri Spivak called it. This became the foundation of what is called postcolonial theory, which argued that leading lights of the Indian Renaissance such as Nehru, Bankim Chandra and Ram Mohan Roy were mentally colonised because they were seeing India through western conceptual categories. Any change that challenged India’s “unique cultural gestalt”, as Nandy liked to call it, was to be resisted.

All told, preservation of cultural meanings took priority over validity. Objectively false cosmology of the ‘other’ was not to be challenged because it gave meaning to people’s lives. Any demand for self-correction of local knowledges was routinely decried as a rationalist ‘witch-hunt’. The alternative to universalism was that of ‘critical traditionalism’ or ‘borderland epistemologies’. Cultures should be encouraged to create an eclectic mix of different and even contradictory ways of knowing. One need not reject modern science altogether, but rather selectively absorb it into the Indian gestalt: Contradictions were not to be questioned and removed, but rather celebrated as expressions of difference.

The picture of science that social constructivism offers is tailor-made for the doublespeak of Vedic science. All the major conclusions of science studies — culturally different but equally rational paths to truth, equation of universalism with colonialism and totalitarianism, penchant for eclecticism and hybridity, and the condemnation of disenchantment of nature — end up restating the fundamental assumptions which the nationalist neo-Hindus have always used to assert the superior ‘scientificity’ of Hindu metaphysics and mysticism. Postmodern prophets who promise us a kinder gentler science do indeed face backward to the spirit-soaked metaphysics of orthodox Hinduism, which

has, in fact, inhibited the growth of reason, equality and freedom in India. While the Abrahamic religions are wary of epistemological relativism out of the fear of relativising the Word of God revealed in the Bible or the Koran, Brahminical Hinduism (and Hindu nationalism) thrives on a hierarchical relativism to evade all challenges to its idealistic metaphysics and mystical ways of knowing. Rather than accept the naturalistic and empirical theories of modern science as contradicting the Vedantic philosophy – which they actually do — Hindu nationalists simply declare modern science to be true only within its limited materialistic assumptions. They do not reject modern science (who can?) but ‘merely’ treat it as one among the many different paths to the ultimate truth, which is known only to the Vedic Hinduism.

By enshrining relativism as a source of empowerment of the weak, social constructivist theory has unintentionally provided intellectual respectability to the strategy of hierarchical inclusivism which is the time-tested method of Hindu apologetics

Let me, very briefly, give some examples of this convergence between supposedly emancipatory postmodernist deconstruction of science and the clearly reactionary, chauvinistic doublespeak of Vedic science.

For starters, take attempts to ‘decolonise’ modern science: by viewing nature through local conceptual categories of women, non-western people and other cultural minorities. Hindu nationalists see themselves as a part and parcel of this postcolonial enterprise. They justify developing a science in accord with the Vedic cosmology as an attempt to decolonise the ‘Hindu mind’ of western, Semitic-monotheistic influences. Indeed, scholar-activists sympathetic to the Hindu worldview, including Rajiv Malhotra and Koenard Elst routinely cite the writings of Ashis Nandy, Ronald Inden and even Gayatri Spivak as allies in a shared project of understanding India through Hindu categories

Like the postmodernist supporters of ethno-sciences, they do not deny that modern science has discovered some truths about nature. But they declare them to be lower-level truths, because they merely deal with dead matter, shorn of consciousness. Notwithstanding all pious declarations of the ‘death’ of the Newtonian world view of matter obeying mechanical laws, the fact is that any number of rigorous, double-blind tests have failed to show any signs of disembodied consciousness or mind-stuff in nature: matter obeying mindless laws of physics is all there is. But in the Vedic science discourse, the overwhelming evidence for adequacy of matter to explain the higher functions of mind and life are set aside as a result of ‘knowledge filtration’ by western-trained scientists. Take the example of the emerging theory of ‘Vedic creation-

ism' (which updates the spiritual evolutionary theories of Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda). Its chief architects, Michael Cremo and Richard Thompson, claim that Darwinian evolutionary biologists and mainstream biologists, being products of the western ontological assumptions, have been systematically ignoring and hiding evidence that supports the theory of 'devolution of species' from the Brahman through the mechanism of karma and rebirth. All knowledge, they claim, parroting social constructivism, is a product of interests and biases. On this account, Vedic creationism, explicitly grounded in Vedic cosmology is as plausible and defensible as Darwinism, grounded on the naturalistic and capitalist assumptions of the western scientists.

Vedic creationism is only one example of 'decolonised science'. More generally, Hindu nationalists routinely insist on the need to develop a science that is organically related to the innate nature, svabhava or chitti of India. India's chitti, they insist, lies in holistic thought, in keeping matter and spirit, nature and god together (as compared to the 'Semitic mind' which separates the two). Hindu nationalists have been using this purported holism of Hinduism as the cornerstone of their argument: any interpretation of modern science that fits in with this spirit-centered holism is declared to be valid Vedic science while naturalistic, mainstream interpretations are discarded as 'western'. The overwhelming enthusiasm for Rupert Sheldrake's occult biology (which builds upon the failed vitalistic theories of Jagdish Chandra Bose) and the near unanimous recasting of quantum mechanics in mystical terms are examples of the kind of critical traditionalism and hybridity sanctioned by postmodernists.

But it gets worse. As is well known, Hindu nationalists have been keen on proving that the landmass of India was the original homeland of the 'Aryans' and therefore the cradle of all civilisation. 'Vedic Aryans', on this account, were the authors of all natural sciences which then spread to Greece, Sumeria, China and other major civilisations in antiquity. To substantiate these claims, all kinds of modern scientific discoveries are read back into the Rig Veda, the most ancient of all Vedas. But such boastful claims raise the question of methodology. How did our Vedic forebears figure out the speed of light, the distance between the sun and the earth and why did they code it into the shape and size of fire altars? Similar questions arise for the more general claims that are basic to Hindu metaphysics, namely that there is a higher realm of ultimate reality (Brahman) that cannot be assessed through sensory means. How did our Vedic forebears know it exists and that it actually determines the course of evolution of species, and makes the matter that we all are made of? How can you experience what is beyond all sensory knowledge? But even more important for the claims of scientificity of the Vedas, how do you test the empirical claims based upon that experience? Here one finds an incredibly brazen claim for relativism and the culture-boundedness of rationality. Because in Hinduism there are no distinc-

tions between the spirit and matter, one can understand laws that regulate matter by studying the laws of the spirit. And the laws of spirit can be understood by turning inward, through yoga and meditation leading to mystical experiences. Supporters of this mysticism-as-science argue that all science gains its coherence from within its own culturally sanctioned assumptions; modern science puts an artificial limit on knowledge as only that knowledge which can be accessible to senses. Within Hinduism however, it is as rational and scientific to take the non-sensory 'seeing' — that is mystical and other meditative practices — as empirical evidence of the spiritual and natural realm. This purported scientificity of the spiritual realm, in turn, paves the way for declaring occult New Age practices like astrology, vastu, and quantum healing and even yagnas as scientific within the Vedic-Hindu universe. This defence of parity (i.e. equal rationality) of the Vedic method of non-sensory, mystical knowing is fundamentally a social constructivist argument: it assumes that all sciences are valid for a given community that shares a fundamental metaphysics.

Long ago, Julien Benda wrote in his *La Trahison De Clercs*, that when intellectuals betray their calling — that is, when intellectuals begin to exalt the particular over the universal, the passions of the multitude over the moral good — then there is nothing left to prevent a society's slide into tribalism and violence. Postmodernism represents a treason of the clerks which has given intellectual respectability to reactionary religiosity. With the best intentions of giving marginalised social groups — especially if they were women and if they belonged to the non-western world — the right to their own ways of knowing, western academics, in alliance with populist Third Worldist intellectuals, have succeeded in painting science and modernity as the enemy of the people. Rather than encourage and nurture a critical spirit toward inherited traditions, many of which are authoritarian and patriarchal, postmodernist intellectuals have waged a battle against science and against the spirit of the Enlightenment itself. As the case of Vedic science in the service of Hindu nationalism in India demonstrates, this misguided attack on the Enlightenment has only aided the growth of pseudoscience, superstitions and tribalism.

□

*Meera Nanda is a biologist and the author of Breaking the spell of Dharma and other Essays and Prophets Facing Backwards: Postmodernist critique of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India.*

## THE PROBLEMS OF NUCLEAR ENERGY\*

- Vir Narain

Early in 1995 a seminar on 'Nuclear Energy and Public Safety' was held in Delhi, co-sponsored by the India International Centre and some other organisations. A book, titled *Nuclear Energy and Public Safety*, edited by Dr Vinod Gaur (incidentally one of the earliest members of the Indian Humanist Union) was published after the seminar, with contributions from about twenty eminent scientists, academicians and others. The picture that emerges from this is disturbing, as summed up in the Preface. Talking of "*sloppy technology and management practices*" it says:

*"The devastating fire at Narora, the major flooding of Kakrapara, and the collapse of the containment dome at Kaiga are recent examples of failures, details of which remain unavailable to the public, causing deep concern about the hazard potential of our nuclear installations. This situation supports a lax technological culture through immunity from public exposure at the expense of public anxiety, and clearly underlines the wisdom of creating public transparency of plans and designs and of hazards and failure analyses reports of large and crucial public utilities, as practiced by most democratic nations."*

When the Report was published, the situation in nuclear-power generation was largely static worldwide.. A number of accidents and incidents had led to widespread concerns regarding the hazards of nuclear power generation, and a slowdown – if not stoppage – in the building of new reactors. . The Chernobyl disaster, the incidents at Three Mile Island and Windscale raised serious doubts about the viability of fission-based power generation. In the USA, "*The accident was a watershed event for the US nuclear industry. Seventy-four plants under construction at the time of the accident have since been cancelled. Thirteen plants that were operating when the accident occurred have been permanently closed by their owners. Only fifty-three plants then under construction were completed and placed into service. No nuclear power plants have been ordered since the accident.*" The Bush administration has changed all that and is heralding the Renaissance of Nuclear Power.

Efforts are being made to develop safer and more efficient reactor designs. An international task force has agreed on six nuclear reactor technologies for deployment between 2010 and 2030. All six are expected to yield advances in terms of sustainability, economics, reliability and safety. All these aspects involve highly complex as well as controversial technical

\* *Text of notes prepared for a panel-discussion on the "Problems and Perils of Nuclear Energy" held in India International Centre on 4 Dec 2005.*

ations, and it would be presumptuous on my part to try to touch on these. For the purposes of today's discussion I shall try to confine myself to safety and security. In this context I believe it is important to make a distinction between safety and security; although the close relationship between the two must be borne in mind.

### Safety

Safety concerns safeguards against breakdowns, accidents arising out of negligence or mismanagement; and minimising the damage caused by natural disasters. In the case of nuclear energy the major areas of safety concerns are: mining, processing, reactor operations, spent fuel, waste management and decommissioning. Whether adequate safety can be ensured (in theory as well as in practice) in each of these areas has always been debated; but the issues are so highly technical that they are best left to the experts. It is probably true that for every expert there is an equal and opposite expert. This, of course, greatly helps in selective quotation; and, with your permission, I shall indulge in it a bit.

On the subject of mining: *"From the mining of uranium to the manufacturing of weapons and nuclear power, workers are faced with the risk of exposure to radiation. According to reports by the International Commission for Radiological Protection (ICRP), work-related deaths in uranium mines are estimated at between 5,500 deaths (for radiation workers @ 3 mSv) to 37,500 deaths (for radiation workers @ 20 mSv) per million workers a year. This compared with deaths in the manufacturing industry (estimated at 110 deaths per year per million workers) and the construction industry (estimated at 164 deaths per million workers per year)".*

On reactor safety: *"Nuclear power plants are and will always be vulnerable to accidents resulting in meltdown or other large radiation releases due to human error and worn out or defective parts. Even without an accident or attack, nuclear power plants threaten public health by routinely releasing radiation into the air, soil and water. Moreover, U.S. nuclear power plants have a concerning record of violating safety regulations while regulators delay, deny, and defer to the financial interests of nuclear plant owners and operators. These failures increase the risk that nuclear reactors pose to the public."*

On waste management, *"No technically or economically feasible methods have been proven for the ultimate disposal of radioactive waste; a grim legacy from the nuclear power program for future generations. Several proposals for dealing with the wastes exist and one or more of these approaches may eventually be shown to be satisfactory, but important questions*

*remain unanswered today about all of them”.*

### **Security**

Security relates to protection from deliberately hostile actions such as sabotage, terrorist attack or attacks by missiles or bombs. Even if it is conceded that adequate safeguards can be instituted to prevent any catastrophic outcome in case of accident, negligence, mismanagement or natural disaster, vulnerability to enemy action still has to be taken into account - particularly for states like India, which live in a troubled neighbourhood. A successful attack on a nuclear plant can be incalculably catastrophic. In his landmark book on the subject: *Nuclear Plants as Weapons for the Enemy: An Unrecognized Military Peril*, Bennett Ramberg points out that any country that possesses nuclear energy facilities gives its adversaries a quasi- nuclear capability to use against it. A US Admiral is candid about this. *“Once a war starts, the value system changes and anything you can do to hurt the adversary and cause him problems, you find justification for doing.”* He recalls hearing someone say, “You don’t have to take the bang to the enemy; the bang is already there when you take out his nuclear plants.” He was talking about the reported attack by the US on the Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Center reactor in Iraq, just ten kilometers southeast of Baghdad. It was a small Russian-built research reactor. Nuclear plants, static and prominently visible, are ideal military targets. The world has more than 300 research reactors and almost 500 large nuclear power plants – all sitting ducks. Every nuclear plant is, in effect, a potential nuclear bomb embedded in our territory. It would be unrealistic to count on our nuclear facilities not being attacked in a warlike situation, or in terrorist operations. As Martin Zuberi says, *“The core of a typical nuclear plant contains about 1,000 times the radioactivity released by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. A high explosive bomb used against it would acquire the attributes of a nuclear weapon without its blast effect. According to an environmental impact statement of the U.S Nuclear Regulatory Commission a large truck bomb used against a nuclear reactor in a highly populated area could produce 130,000 deaths. An ordinary conventional explosive could thus be turned into a large radiological weapon.”*<sup>1</sup>

Within a nuclear power plant perhaps the most vulnerable part is the spent fuel pool. Spent fuel pools for boiling water reactors are located above ground. This can make these reactors even more vulnerable. Conventional explosives, by causing a breach in the pool water connections can cause a fire worse than even a reactor meltdown. As one report says, “If a fire were to break out at the Millstone Reactor Unit 3 spent fuel pond in Connecticut, it would result a three-fold increase in background exposures. This level triggers the NRC evacuation requirement and could render 29,000 square miles of land uninhabitable.

*continued on page 58*

## DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA

- Vishwa Mohan Tiwari

In the present knowledge era, the relationship between media and society is rather complicated. Today media is so powerful that it can spread knowledge across the globe faster than information used to travel in a village. The recent incident of cartoons on Prophet Mohammed published in a rather sleepy country, Denmark, proves this. In fact media has aggravated the clash of civilizations. There is no solution in sight to this situation. There is no room for dialogue here. More than the media it is the bitter feud between the two schools of religious thought. Such a situation can endanger democracy as well freedom of expression. It compels us to think that, if nothing is done about it, the whole world can be engulfed in violence.

Media has created a global village and changed the way the world looks at itself. It has accelerated the process of development. But in the process democracy has been put on the back burner. There appears to be a vested interest of the media in this change over. My thesis is that media has put democracy in danger. In order to make more money it is pushing society towards unnecessary, and often vulgar, consumerism. I would like to quote from Nobel laureate American economist George Akerloff's important essay Market of Lemon and Peach. He compared lemon to a precious object and the peach to an elegant object say a vintage car. As compared to the seller an ordinary buyer knows precious little about an old car. The buyer fears he might be taken for a ride. Because of this lack of trust he might not go for the car. If this mistrust persists then lemons would never be sold, resulting to a total collapse of the lemon. The main reason for the above situation is lack of trust. It arises from a gap in knowledge: equal level of inputs are necessary for both. Akerloff further adds that if a similar communication gap exists between government and the public then democracy will be in danger. The recently-passed 'Right to Information' bill is a welcome step. Lack of information could be a problem for any institution, including the media. That will be a loss for everybody. Therefore it is imperative that all information systems must give correct and topical information to all concerned. It will add to the quality of life.

Media is called the Fourth Estate. It is its duty to inform us about the shortcomings of the other three. For the success of democracy it must tell us about parties and candidates in an election. In broader terms it is supposed to inform, educate and entertain us. Now it has starting misinforming us. Sometimes it seems to be allied to a political party. It can have a political



commitment. But it can't be blindfolded.. It must provide space to other genuine expressions. Editorial space is being replaced by advertisements. It leads to consumerism of the worst order. Some channels show more ads than the other content. It has left no room for our desire to know the truth. It is making us couch potatoes. It is being controlled by corporates. The latter look only at their growing revenue figures. Selfishness and pleasure-seeking can be justified up to a point. After that they lead to decadence.

Twenty years computer and communication entered into an alliance. Then they joined hands with media. It led to sex and violence on the small screen. The devil's advocate said that that was harmless entertainment. It doesn't affect human behaviour but that's not true. A primary level school child can re-enact a jingle. An adolescent can absorb the whole scene like a blotting paper. But the first aim is to defend public interest and consequently democratic values. It is an established fact that whatever a child or a youth is exposed to gets translated into his behaviour pattern. But media doesn't buy this argument because it is obsessed with profit. We continue to ignore this trend but there have been many researches on it in the West. When tobacco ban was being discussed many cigarette-making companies came up with interesting arguments. Anne Landman gives so much information on her website on cigarettes that one feels as if she had a dip in the sea and emerged with a handful of pearls. She had unearthed a 1969 document of Brown and Williams that has countered the arguments of anti-cigarette lobby. It is our duty to create doubts in the minds of people against dogmas. Unfortunately we can't fight with the cigarette lobby by a mandatory slogan that "cigarette smoking is injurious to health". The tobacco industry comes out with convincing research-based inferences. Media publishes these findings at the behest of the advertisers. It is true that media can't survive without profit. But the first goal should be public interest and democracy. Robert McChesni of Illinois University says that democracy becomes poor when media gets rich.

We can see that the culture has been consumerised. The advertised products are not only unnecessary at most of the times but they lead to the corruption of mind, body and the soul. It makes the citizen irresponsible. Today the dividing lines between news, advertisement and entertainment have been blurred. Media is misleading instead of leading. It pretends to investigate in addition to reporting but there is a hidden agenda behind this. For example today the brand manager is more important than the editor. How long can we expect him to safeguard public or democratic interests. In the era of knowledge it has become important for the media to realise that news is not scattered pieces of information but collectively it is supposed to provide us a worldview.

In the realm of entertainment, pop songs and dance numbers are having an adverse impact. Media has discovered another source of income in that. Parents could have played a role in it but either they have been declared outdated or they don't have time. Media is revelling in this. Governments are unable to play their role. Even the judiciary is slipping up.

Media is being inspired by the West. But it can't last long if media plays its role. Media will have to think beyond business. Media will have to show the virtue of morality. Internet is one such example. It revolutionised the information explosion. But without any ethics. All this leads to one conclusion that we will have to return to Indian values. Our system can correct the present and ensure the future. Media can check the other three states only when it checks itself. But will the cat bell itself?

*Air Vice Marshal Tiwari (retd) is an electronics engineer, and a prolific writer on a variety of subjects.*

□

*continued from page 55*

“The nuclear power industry, with the support of the Bush administration, is pushing for a revival of nuclear energy. The industry is aggressively seeking to license and build the first new nuclear reactors in a generation. Toward this end, nuclear companies have sought public approval by disingenuously presenting the energy source as clean, renewable, and necessary to deal with global warming, environmental degradation, and dwindling petroleum resources. But nuclear energy is neither clean nor green. While nuclear reactors do release a smaller amount of greenhouse gases than their coal and natural gas counterparts, they create a significant amount of dangerous radioactive waste that remains toxic for hundreds of thousands of years. Beyond the health, safety, and security risks posed by nuclear generation of electricity—as well as its extremely high costs—this waste is a shameful legacy of our environmental exploitation that will beset generations to come.”

That the impediments in the way of India exercising the option to develop nuclear power-generation facilities are likely to be removed is certainly a cause for celebration, and represents the triumph of Indian diplomacy. That India is technologically ready to exercise this option does immense credit to India's scientific establishment. But there seems to be a disquieting complacency, and surprising evasiveness or silence, on the issues of security and safety. Faced with the prospects of an energy famine, even environmentalists have changed sides. The stakes are incredibly high, permitting almost nil margin for error.

□

## ANCIENT INDIAN WISDOM

- Dr. Ramendra

IHEU's 2005 Paris Congress Declaration refers to the [Humanist](#) ideas of the Charvakas of ancient India. Dr. Ramendra presents the salient features of the philosophy of the Charvakas, developed 600 years before the Common Era. This philosophy is also known as Lokayata and appears surprisingly contemporary in some of its aspects.

### Ancient Wisdom

Ancient Indian wisdom is quite often equated with “spiritualism” of one kind or the other. However, real ancient Indian wisdom is to be found, in my opinion, in the teachings of the Lokayata or Charvaka school of philosophy. Sadly, no work of the Lokayata school has survived at present. Some popular verses with philosophical contents have, however, come down to us through the writings of its opponents.

Ironically, the most significant collection of such authentic popular verses (*pramanik lokagatha*) has been collected by Madhava – an orthodox Sanskrit writer of fourteenth century A.D – in his compendium of Indian philosophy titled *Sarva-darshana-sangraha*. Here are some extracts from the verses collected by Madhava:

*“While life is yours, live joyously; None can escape Death's searching eye: When once this frame of ours they burn, How shall it ever again return?”*

*The pleasure which arises to men from contact with sensible objects, Is to be relinquished as accompanied by pain – such is the reasoning of fools; There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world, Nor do the actions of the four [castes](#), orders, etc., produce any real effect. There are four elements, earth, water, fire and air; And from these four elements alone is consciousness produced – The fire is hot, the water cold, refreshing and cool the breeze of morn; By whom came this variety? From their own nature was it born. The Agnihotra, the three [Vedas](#), the ascetic's three staves, and smearing oneself with ashes – Brihaspati says, these are but means of livelihood for those who have no manliness nor sense. If a beast slain in the Jyotishtoma rite will itself go to heaven, Why then does not the sacrificer, forthwith offer his own father?”*

### In Modern Language

We may paraphrase, and logically rearrange the ideas expressed by the Charvakas in simple and contemporary prose:

Happiness is the highest end in life. There is no soul and no life after death. There is no world other than this world. Heaven and liberation from the so-called cycle of birth and death are imaginary ideals. Everyone will inevitably die. No one will be reborn. Therefore, one should make the best of one's life and live happily as long as one lives. It is irrational to suggest that one should give up pleasures of life because they are mixed with pain. It is just like saying that

Source : *International Humanist News*, November 2005

*Humanist Outlook - Winter 2005*

we should throw away our finest grains because they are covered with husk and dust. Earth, water, fire and air are the four elements. Consciousness, too, arises from these four elements only; just like intoxicating power arising from mixing together certain ingredients which themselves do not have intoxicating power. There is no soul apart from body. When we say “I am fat” or “I am lean” attributes like fatness reside only in the body. Phrases like, “my body” are only significant metaphorically. The hotness of fire and the coolness of water etc. are all natural attributes. Everything behaves according to its own nature and the variety in things comes from nature alone.

The Vedas are not revealed. Their authority should not be accepted. The authors of the Vedas were devoid of intelligence and honesty. Vedic sacrifices, ceremonies for the dead (shraddha), gifts to priests and other related rituals are useless and bear no fruit anywhere. They were created only as a means of livelihood for [Brahmin](#) priests.

#### **The Lokayata Philosophy**

First and foremost, we find in Lokayata philosophy a total rejection of supernaturalism (soul, other world, heaven, gods, etc.). It is a completely this-worldly or secular philosophy. Secondly, it is a hedonistic philosophy. In other words, it regards human happiness as the highest ethical end. It rejects imaginary ethical ends like attainment of heaven and moksha or nirvana and clearly asserts that one should not run away from life just because pleasure in life is mixed with pain. The basic idea of Lokayata philosophy is: this world is the only world, this life is the only life and one should make the best of it. This basic idea is shared by contemporary Humanists – therefore, Lokayata is humanistic. There is no doubt about Lokayata being materialistic and naturalistic. Its doctrine that earth, fire, air and water are the only elements is similar to that of ancient Greek materialist Empedocles, just as its hedonism is similar to that of ancient Greek hedonists, Aristippus and Epicurus. In the Indian context, Lokayata rejects the authority of the Vedas, the Vedic rituals and the [varna](#)-ashrama dharma (the caste system). Thus, there is a clear and strong rejection of Brahminism. It may even be called anti- Brahminism. The naturalism and materialism of Lokayata and its rejection of Vedic rituals as merely means of livelihood for Brahmin priests, implies rejection of the gods. Thus, Lokayata is atheistic. In fact, Lokayata is the only school of ancient and medieval Indian philosophy which is atheist (nastika) in all the three senses of the term. It rejects the soul and the so-called other-world. It rejects gods as well as the authority of the Vedas. To sum up, Lokayata is a secular and nastika philosophy. We find naturalism, hedonism, [humanism](#), materialism, atheism and anti-Brahminism in Lokayata. Thus, from a rational, humanist point of view it may be described as the genuine wisdom of ancient India.

*Dr. Ramendra teaches Philosophy in Patna, and is President of the Bihar [Rationalist Society](#).*

□

## FEMALE FOETICIDE IN INDIA

- Indu Grewal and J.Kishore

### Introduction

Some of the worst gender ratios, indicating gross violation of women's rights, are found in South and East Asian countries such as India and China. The determination of the sex of the foetus by ultrasound scanning, amniocentesis, and in vitro fertilization has aggravated this situation. No moral or ethical principle supports such a procedure for gender identification. The situation is further worsened by a lack of awareness of women's rights and by the indifferent attitude of governments and medical professionals. In India, the available legislation for prevention of sex determination needs strict implementation, alongside the launching of programmes aimed at altering attitudes, including those prevalent in the medical profession.

### Background

The killing of women exists in various forms in societies the world over. However, Indian society displays some unique and particularly brutal versions, such as dowry deaths and sati. Female foeticide is an extreme manifestation of violence against women. Female foetuses are selectively aborted after pre-natal sex determination, thus avoiding the birth of girls. As a result of selective abortion, between 35 and 40 million girls and women are missing from the Indian population. In some parts of the country, the sex ratio of girls to boys has dropped to less than 800:1,000. The United Nations has expressed serious concern about the situation.

The sex ratio has altered consistently in favour of boys since the beginning of the 20th century (see Table), and the effect has been most pronounced in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. It was in these states that private foetal sex determination clinics were first established and the practice of selective abortion became popular from the late 1970s. Worryingly, the trend is far stronger in urban rather than rural areas, and among literate rather than illiterate women, exploding the myth that growing affluence and spread of basic education alone will result in the erosion of gender bias.

Sex Ratio in India 1901 - 2001 (Females per 1,000 males)				
Year	Sex Ratio	Year	Sex Ratio	*Ratio for children 0 - 6yr
1901	972	1961	941	976
1911	964	1971	930	964
1921	955	1981	934	962
1931	950	1991	929	945
1941	945	2001	933	927
1951	946	* Data not available 1901 to 1951		

### **Status of Indian Women**

The adverse sex ratio has been linked with the low status of women in Indian communities, both [Hindu](#) and Muslim. The status of women in a society can be determined by their education, health, economic role, presence in the professions and management, and decision-making power within the family. It is deeply influenced by the beliefs and values of society. Islam permits polygamy and gives women fewer rights than men. Among Hindus, preference for the male child is likewise deeply enshrined in belief and practice. The Ramayana and the Manusmriti (the Laws of Manu) represent the ideal woman as obedient and submissive, and always needing the care of a male: first father, then husband, then son.

The birth of a son is regarded as essential in [Hinduism](#) and many prayers and lavish offerings are made in temples in the hope of having a male child. Modern medical technology is used in the service of this religion-driven devaluing of women and girls.

Religion operates alongside other cultural and economic factors in lowering the status of women. The practice of dowry has spread nationwide, to communities and castes in which it had never been the custom, fuelled by consumerism and emulation of upper caste practices. In the majority of cases, the legal system has no impact on the practice of dowry. It is estimated that a dowry death occurs in India every 93 minutes.

The need for a dowry for girl children, and the ability to demand a dowry for boys exerts considerable economic pressure on families to use any means to avoid having girls, who are seen as a liability. Sonalda Desai has reported that there are posters in Bombay advertising sex-determination tests that read, 'It is better to pay 500 Rs now than 50,000 Rs (in dowry) later'.

### **Women and Developments in Reproductive Technology**

Abortion was legalized in India in 1971 (Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act) to strengthen humanitarian values (pregnancy can be aborted if it is a result of sexual assault, contraceptive failure, if the baby would be severely handicapped, or if the mother is incapable of bearing a healthy child). Amniocentesis was introduced in 1975 to detect foetal abnormalities but it soon began to be used for determining the sex of the baby. Ultrasound scanning, being a non-invasive technique, quickly gained popularity and is now available in some of the most remote rural areas. Both techniques are now being used for sex determination with the intention of abortion if the foetus turns out to be female. These methods do not involve manipulation of genetic material to select the sex of a baby. Recent preconception gender selection (PGS), however, includes flow cytometry, preimplantation gender determination of the embryo, and in

vitro fertilization to ensure the birth of a baby of the desired sex without undergoing abortion. In PGS, X and Y sperms are separated and the enriched sperms are used to fertilize the ovum. The method was intended to reduce the risk of diseases related to the X chromosome, which are far more likely to occur in boys than in girls (who have two X chromosomes). Ironically, it is being used in India to avoid giving birth to girl children.

Most of those in the medical profession, being part of the same gender biased society, are steeped in the same attitudes concerning women. It is scarcely surprising that they are happy to fulfil the demands of prospective parents. Medical malpractice in this area is flourishing, and bans on gender selection, for example in [Maharashtra](#), have had little effect.

### **Consequences of Female Foeticide**

Given the lower value placed on women in Indian society, prenatal sex determination with the intention of preventing female births must be viewed as a manifestation of violence against women, a violation of their [human rights](#). The pregnant woman, though often equally anxious to have a boy, is frequently pressurized to undergo such procedures. Many women suffer from psychological trauma as a result of forcibly undergoing repeated abortions. More generally, demographers warn that in the next twenty years there will be a shortage of brides in the marriage market mainly because of the adverse juvenile sex ratio, combined with an overall decline in fertility. While fertility is declining more rapidly in urban and educated families, nevertheless the preference for male children remains strong. For these families, modern medical technologies are within easy reach. Thus selective abortion and sex selection are becoming more common.

In rural areas, as the number of marriageable women declines, men would tend to marry younger women, leading to a rise in fertility rates and thus a high rate of population growth. The abduction of girls is an associated phenomenon. The Hindustan Times recently reported that young girls from Assam and West Bengal are kidnapped and sold into marriage in neighbouring Haryana.

The impact on society should not be underestimated. According to Chinese estimates, by 2020 there are likely to be 40 million unmarried young men, called *guang guan* or 'bare branches', in China, because of the adverse sex ratio. A society with a preponderance of unmarried young men is prone to particular dangers. More women are likely to be exploited as sex workers. Increases in molestations and rape are an obvious result. The sharp rise in sex crimes in Delhi have been attributed to the unequal sex ratio.

### **Prevention of Sex Determination**

In 1994, the Government of India passed the Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act with the aim of preventing female foeticide. The implementation of this Act was slow. It was later amended and replaced in 2002 by the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act without ever having been properly implemented.

The Act has a central and state level Supervisory Board, an Appropriate Authority, and supporting Advisory Committee. The function of the Supervisory Board is to oversee, monitor, and make amendments to the provisions of the Act. Appropriate Authority provides registration, and conducts the administrative work involved in inspection, investigation, and the penalizing of defaulters. The Advisory Committee provides expert and technical support to the Appropriate Authority. Contravening the provisions of the Act can lead to a fine of Rs 10,000 and up to three years imprisonment for a first offence, with greater fines and longer terms of imprisonment for repeat offenders. The Appropriate Authority informs the central or state medical council to take action against medical professionals, leading to suspension or the striking off of practitioners found guilty of contravening the provisions of the Act.

Before conducting any prenatal diagnostic procedure, the medical practitioner must obtain a written consent from the pregnant woman in a local language that she understands. Prenatal tests may be performed in various specified circumstances, including risk of chromosomal abnormalities in the case of women over 35, and genetic diseases evident in the family history of the couple.

### **Implementation of the 1994 Act**

We conducted a study to assess the implementation of the 1994 Act in South Delhi and make recommendations for its improvement. This involved examining the organizational structure, observing 26 clinics, and distributing a questionnaire to patients. The results showed up serious failures in management and implementation, lack of commitment and motivation, widespread corruption, and little knowledge in clinics of the provisions of the Act. The presence of individuals outside the medical profession, in particular those involved with human rights, would have helped to prevent fraternity bias – an unwillingness to bring medical colleagues to account.

The survey of patient attitudes showed that only 40% of male patients and 30% of female patients were aware of the prohibition of sex determination. While 90% purported to agree with the principle of the Act, they nevertheless maintained that a male child was important for the strengthening of the family.



### **Preventing Female Foeticide**

The removal of this practice in Indian society is a serious challenge. It must involve

- (i) A move away from religious teachings and the advocacy of a scientific, rational, and humanist approach.
- (ii) The empowerment of women and a strengthening of women's rights through campaigning against practices such as dowry, and ensuring strict implementation of existing legislation.
- (iii) Ensuring the development of and access to good health care services.
- (iv) Inculcating a strong ethical code of conduct among medical professionals, beginning with their training as undergraduates.
- (v) Simple methods of complaint registration, accessible to the poorest and most vulnerable women.
- (vi) Wide publicization in the media of the scale and seriousness of the practice. NGOs should take a key role in educating the public on this matter.
- (vii) Regular assessment of indicators of status of women in society, such as sex ratio, and female mortality, literacy, and economic participation.

It is only by a combination of monitoring, education, campaigns, and effective legal implementation that the deep-seated attitudes and practices against women and girls can be eroded.

Source : *International Humanist News*, May 2004

*Dr. Indu Grewal is Senior Medical officer, Directorate of Health Services, Government of Delhi. Dr. J. Kishore is Associate Professor of Community Medicine, Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi.*

□

***During the Iran-Iraq War, the Ayatollah Khomeini imported 500,000 small plastic keys from Taiwan. The trinkets were meant to be inspirational. After Iraq invaded in September 1980, it had quickly become clear that Iran's forces were no match for Saddam Hussein's professional, well-armed military. To compensate for their disadvantage, Khomeini sent Iranian children, some as young as twelve years old, to the front lines. There, they marched in formation across minefields toward the enemy, clearing a path with their bodies. Before every mission, one of the Taiwanese keys would be hung around each child's neck. It was supposed to open the gates to paradise for them.***

Source: <https://ssl.tnr.com/p/docsub.mhtml?i=20060424&s=kuntzel042406>

## A LETTER TO HUMANIST FRIENDS IN INDIA AND ABROAD

1<sup>st</sup> April, 2006 \*\*

Dear humanist friends,

I write this letter to tell you that I have, this forenoon, handed over charge as Chairman of the Indian Humanist Union, to Air Marshal (Rtd) Vir Narain. Having worked as Chairman of IHU for about 15 years, including more than 5 years as the Editor of the Humanist Outlook, and before that as Vice - Chairman, Executive of IHU for 18 years, I have, for quite some time, expressed the need for a change. Finally, in our last AGM held on 4th December 2005, Vir Narain was persuaded to take over as the new Chairman with effect from 1st April 2006 and was so elected unanimously.

Vir Narain, apart from being a Founder Member of IHU, is also a well regarded writer on humanist subjects, particularly through his editorials as the Editor of the Humanist Outlook for the last 7 years, which have received much appreciation from readers in India and outside. He is a noted Defence analyst, has written books and articles on Defence matters and worked as a Consulting Editor on these subjects. He is also the inventor of an internationally recognized formula in aerial navigation known as the "Vir Narain Formula" which is part of the Air Force training syllabus in India and in other countries. With this intellectual and administrative background, he will, I am sure do very well as the new head of the IHU and I hope will be greatly helped by co-operation and support from you, as you were good enough to give to me.

I do hope to continue to be involved with IHU and the humanist movement in some ways, not requiring much day to day administrative work and leaving me some more time for my interest in the transportation sector. On this occasion, I recall my very pleasant memories of lively and fruitful interaction with a large number of humanist friends in India and elsewhere through writings, correspondence, meetings, seminars, World Humanist Congresses, IHEU Board meetings, General Assembly sessions etc. I especially remember the Narsingh Narain Memorial Lectures held for 12 years from 1991 to 2002, the IHEU Board Meeting at Mexico City in November 1996 in which the revised Minimum Statement of Humanism was approved, the IHEU's 50th Anniversary Congress at Amsterdam in July 2002 when the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 was adopted and the IHEU General Assembly at Paris in July 2005 on which occasion the Resolution on Comprehensive Secularism [incorporating the right and the responsibility of the State to intervene in the territory of religion for preventing gross violation of human rights] was passed. I would like to express my deep thanks to all of you for being such excellent and valuable company during all these years and for your friendship, understanding and support in so many ways.

With all good wishes

Prakash Narain

## NEWS AND NOTES

### **New Chairman for IHU**

The 46<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Indian Humanist Union was held on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2005. Shri Prakash Narain reiterated his request made in the last AGM, and earlier too, for someone else to take over as Chairman IHU. He felt that even taking into account the merits of continuity stressed by members in the past, a balanced view would suggest the desirability of a change now. He said he had worked as Chairman IHU for more than 15 years (including 5 years, in between, also as Editor of the Humanist Outlook), and before that as Vice Chairman (Executive) of IHU for nearly 18 years and felt the need for some relief. He therefore invited suggestions for the election of some one else as the new Chairman of IHU.

Members present complimented Shri Prakash Narain for his dedicated and outstanding work for IHU and its allied organizations for these long numbers of years, and appreciated his desire for a change. The Members present unanimously suggested that Air Marshal Vir Narain, may be elected as the next Chairman. It was pointed out by them that Air Marshal Narain was a Founder Member of IHU and currently the highly regarded Editor of the Humanist Outlook. After discussion, Air Marshal Vir Narain agreed to accept the position in order to give a well-deserved relief to Shri Prakash Narain. Air Marshal Vir Narain's name was proposed by Shri Mahesh Kapoor and seconded by Shri R C Mody and he was elected unanimously.

Chairman's Office and the Office of the Administrative Secretary IHU/HEFS, the changeover in the post of Chairman may be effected from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2006.

\*\*\*\* no italics

### **Annual Day of IHU**

The Annual Day of the Indian Humanist Union was celebrated on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2005 at D-36, Jangpura Extension, New Delhi, in conjunction with its 46<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting. In the forenoon, before the AGM, an Annual Day Meet was held at the same venue. It started with the choral singing of the celebrated humanist song "Aisa Ho Sansar Hamara" which brought back to many the nostalgic memories of the early years of the society in Nainital and Lucknow. The other main items in the programme were a recitation of "A Bouquet of Quotations for Humanists", reading out some extracts from the writings of Narsingh Narain bringing out his distinctive formulation of a "gentle but steadfast" humanism which had received appreciation from people in various countries, recitation of a peace song by Nandita Narain, a teacher activist, a poem on peace by the new IHU member, former Ambassador Nigam Prakash and a powerful poem on fight against injustice by the noted Hindi poet, Mahendra Misra. The music and recitation was followed by the Annual Day Lunch.

### **The Promise and Perils of Nuclear Energy**

In conjunction with the IHU Annual Day and AGM on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2005, the IHU organised a Symposium on "The Promise and Perils of Nuclear Energy", in collaboration with the India International Center, New Delhi. The Panel Speakers were Air Marshal Vir Narain, a defense analyst and also editor of the Humanist Outlook and Mahendra Misra, a development analyst, also a Council Member of IHU. The function was chaired by Chairman, IHU, Prakash Narain. Air Marshal Vir Narain brought out the serious hazards involved in the use of atomic energy for power generation. Mahendra Misra in his presentation also spoke against use of nuclear energy from the environmental angle and referred to the political power play involved in the propagation of this option. The presentations by the Panel Speakers were followed by a lively debate with several interventions from the full house, some agreeing with the Panel Speakers and some pointing out the inevitability of the use of nuclear power for civilian purposes keeping in view the rapidly dwindling fossil based sources of energy. In his closing remarks Chairman IHU referred to the main objectives of the Humanist movement towards the furtherance of human values through human self-reliance and mentioned that one of the functions of the movement was to act as a catalytic agent facilitating debate on crucial societal issues in a spirit of free inquiry.

### **Shari'a Courts and Fatwas in India\***

*The Indian Express of 19 August 2005 reported the case of a Hindu approaching an unofficial Shari'a Court in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Puranbhai Shah, a Hindu businessman found it difficult to recover money from Zariful Hasan, a customer to whom Puranbhai had supplied marble. At the suggestion of a friend, Shah then approached the Shari'a court on 4 August 2005. On August 8, as settled at the Shari'a court, he got a cheque for Rs 30,000 from Zariful Hasan. This swift 'justice' is rarely possible through the traditional courts in the Indian sub-continent and was welcomed by the petitioner. An indication that a failing system encourages alternative means that may ultimately weaken the system further. The 'court' was set up nearly a year ago by the unofficial All India Personal Law Board and is headed by Mufti Abdul Qayyum Jaipuri. Of the 128 cases referred to it so far, it has settled 46.*

### **A Fatwa on Fatwas\***

On 16 August, 3 clerics from the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in North India ruled that women should not contest elections, and that if they had to do it, they should do it under veil. This led to widespread protests from Human Rights activists and liberal circles in the country, including some Muslim clerics themselves. The seminary has now decided to impose a ban on issuing religious edicts or *fatwas* on political matters. "All muftis have been directed not to issue any *fatwas* and not to interact with the media," Vice-Chancellor of the Islamic seminary Maulana Marghoobur Rehman said.

### **'No Legal Sanctity'\***

In the light of these developments, India's Union Law Minister H.R. Bhardwaj clarified in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha – India's Upper House of Parliament – that *fatwas* issued by Islamic institutions are not valid in the eye of the law. He clarified that the procedure to be followed by courts in criminal cases are set out in the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 and that *fatwas* issued by Islamic institutions do not have legal sanctity.

### **Fatwa Arrest\***

The Pioneer of 18 Nov 2005 reports that in Indore the police arrested Mohammad Rafiq Qasim, a mufti, for allegedly issuing a *fatwa* in a divorce decree by a court. The mufti's *fatwa* was issued on the ground that the judge was a 'non-muslim', therefore, the judgement was not acceptable under the Islamic Shariat. This follows a recent law suit in the Supreme Court of India seeking to restrain Muslim organizations from establishing a parallel Muslim judicial system. The petition sought an order from the court instructing the organizations to refrain from interfering with the marital status of Muslim citizens and passing any judgment, remark or *fatwa* as well as deciding matrimonial disputes among Muslims. The petition, filed by advocate Vishwa Lochan Madan, urges the court to decide whether Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guaranteeing religious freedom includes the right to administer justice based on faith.

*\*Source : International Humanist News, November 2005*

## LETTERS

### A letter to Humanist Friends in India and Abroad

#### To Prakash Narain

Dear Prakash,

When you now step down I want to thank you warmly for all your contributions to humanism internationally as well as in India. You have been - and are - one of our best intellectual resources, not only because of your intelligence and philosophical capacity but also because you have had the motivation and energy to communicate and even fight for your ideas. Our cooperation has been most fruitful. If we had not had the Minimum Statement, we might have been swallowed by the postmodernist spiritualism of the eighties. I am quite sure that Vir Narain is a worthy successor, and I very much hope that Indian Humanist Union will prosper.

Oslo, Norway

Levi Fragell

*1<sup>st</sup> April 2006*

*email <levi@human.no>*

*Levi Fragell is the immediate past president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union*

#### Humanism in the Contemporary World

Dear Editor,

In the report pertaining to the talk delivered by Professor Sibnarayan Ray at IIC on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2005 [*Humanist Outlook* Vol. 10 No.12, Summer 2005].  
\*\*\*\*\*  
i t is mentioned that in my opening remarks I said that “*humanism was de-*  
\*\*\*\*\*/%  
*scribed in various ways not only in general parlance but also within the international humanist movement*”. This might give an unintended impression that I am wholly satisfied with this multiplicity, as such, and not in favour of much effort being made within the humanist movement to evolve some kind of a commonly agreed broad description. Many humanists do hold this view, but I have been in favour of such efforts being made to provide a better focus to humanist objectives and thus the orientation of its concerted activities. For this reason, I had followed my above quoted comment in the meeting by a reference to the commendable efforts made in this regard recently by the IHEU and had quoted the latest “Minimum Statement of Humanism”, adopted by the IHEU at Mexico City in 1996.

Yours

Prakash Narain

New Delhi

70

*Humanist Outlook - Winter 2005*

**INDIAN HUMANIST UNION**  
**Membership Fees and Magazine Subscription**

<b>MEMBERSHIP FEES</b>	<b>(Rs)</b>
1. Life Member (Single)	750.00
2. Life Member (Couple)	1000.00
3. Associate Life Member (Single)	750.00
4. Associate Life Member (Couple)	1000.00
5. Annual Member (Single)	100.00
6. Annual Member (Couple)	150.00
7. Associate Annual Member (Single)	100.00
8. Associate Annual Member (Couple)	150.00
9. Student Member (Annual)	50.00
10. Associate Student Member (Annual)	50.00
<b>MAGAZINE SUBSCRIPTION</b>	
1. Single Copy	20.00
2. Annual	60.00
3. Annual for Institutions (2 Copies)	120.00

*Notes:*

1. *Membership fees include subscription for the magazine.*
2. *For Magazine Subscribers, the Membership Application Form is not required to be filled up.*
3. *The Magazine Subscriptions above include postage within India.*
4. *Orders for the Magazine can be placed either direct on the Indian Humanist Union or on the following agencies:- (i) M/s Central News Agency, 23/19, Connaught Circus, P.O Box 374, New Delhi - 110 001, (ii) M/s TARU - Books and Journals, "Umang", G-159, Paschim Vihar, New Delhi - 110 063, (iii) M/s Print India, 11, Darya Ganj, New Delhi - 110002*

**The Humanist Outlook, which has a wide and distinguished readership in India and abroad, welcomes suitable advertisements for publication in its quarterly issues. The rates and sizes are:**

	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Size</b>
<b>Full Page</b>	<b>Rs. 5,000/-</b>	<b>Vertical 6 ½" and Horizontal 4 ½"</b>
<b>Half Page</b>	<b>Rs. 4,000/-</b>	<b>Vertical 3" and Horizontal 4 ½"</b>

*The views expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the Indian Humanist Union or of the Editor, Humanist Outlook.*

Printed and Published by Vir Narain on behalf of the Indian Humanist Union, H-41-D, Saket, New Delhi- 110017.  
Phone No. 2686 2191; 2685 9301. E-mail:ihu@vsnl.com. Printed by Rajiv Printers at: WP-85, Wazirpur Village, Ashok Vihar, Delhi – 110052.  
Editor: Vir Narain, H-41-D, Saket, New Delhi - 110017, Phone Nos. 2686 2191; 2685 9301; E-mail:<virnarain@gmail.com>. Administrative Secretary Abhishek Patial, Phone No. 2686 2191; 2685 9301  
Registered No. of the periodical - R.N. 12578/66.

REGISTERED NO: R.N.12578/66 Vol. 11 No. 2 Winter 2005

**DIRECTORY**

**INDIAN HUMANIST UNION (Established 1960)**

**H.O. : D-36, First Floor, Jangpura Extension, New Delhi 110 014**

**Address for Correspondence : H-41-D, Saket, New Delhi- 110017**

**Phone: 2686 2191; 2685 9301; E-Mail: <[ihu@vsnl.com](mailto:ihu@vsnl.com)>**

**Website: <http://humanists.net/india>**

- Founder** - Narsingh Narain (1897-1972)
- Chairman** - Vir Narain, H-41-D, Saket, N Delhi- 17  
E-mail<[virnarain@gmail.com](mailto:virnarain@gmail.com)>
- Vice-Chairman** - Dr. SK Minocha, B-344 B, Sushant Lok I,  
Gurgaon- 122002, Haryana
- Hony.Secy. & Treasurer** - Mahesh Kapoor,D-402 Som Vihar, RK Puram,  
New Delhi - 22
- Members of Executive Council** - Vir Narain; SK Minocha, Mahesh Kapoor,  
Lakshmi Balasubrahmanyam, MK Misra, Chitra Narain,  
Prakash Narain, NC Gupta, DN Choudhri, Ashok  
Madhukar, Ramesh Shukla, RC Mody, VK Gaur, Pradip  
Narain, Rakesh Kumar
- Adm. Secy.** - Abhishek Patial<[ihu@vsnl.com](mailto:ihu@vsnl.com)>

**HUMANIST ENDOWMENT FUND SOCIETY (Established 1970)**

**Email :-** <[humanist@ndf.vsnl.net.in](mailto:humanist@ndf.vsnl.net.in)>

**H.O. : D-36, (FF), Jangpura Extension, New Delhi-110014**

**Address for Correspondence : H-5-D, Saket, New Delhi- 17**

**Phone : 4176 4504; 93 124 35309; email <[rmody@airtelbroadband.in](mailto:rmody@airtelbroadband.in)>**

- Founders** - Narsingh Narain (1897-1972)/Abe Solomon  
(1915- 2004)
- President** - RC Mody, H-5-D, Saket, New Delhi 17  
E-mail: <[rmody@airtelbroadband.in](mailto:rmody@airtelbroadband.in)>
- Vice-President** - Pradip Narain, 2/22, Shanti Niketan, New Delhi -21
- Hony. Secy & Treasurer** - Mahesh Kapoor, D-402, Som Vihar, RK Puram,  
New Delhi - 22 RC Mody, Pradip Narain,
- Members Executive Board** - Mahesh Kapoor, PP Gupta, Prakash Narain,  
D N Chaudhri, Chitra Narain, Sunita Narain.
- Adm. Secy.** - Abhishek Patial <[humanist@ndf.vsnl.net.in](mailto:humanist@ndf.vsnl.net.in)>

**HUMANIST OUTLOOK (Journal of the IHU: under publication since 1966)**

- Founder Editor** - Narsingh Narain (1897-1972)
- Editor** - Vir Narain, H-41/D, Saket, New Delhi-17.  
Phone : 2686 2191; 2685 9301  
E-mail: <[virnarain@gmail.com](mailto:virnarain@gmail.com)>