

humanist outlook

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

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CONTENTS

Editorial: Reject RAP Morality and RAP God		223
A Humanist Alternative for the Dalits	V B Rawat	225
Atrocities on Women Through the Ages	Zoya Zaidi	228
Two Poems:		
Woman Burning Bright, Eighth of March	Zoya Zaidi	232
Mora Buffaloes, Mother's Day And Freedom-	Chitra Narain	235
Faces of Grief	Mousumi Sarkar	238
Dr. Rashid Jehan	Shahla Haidar	241
The Story of our Experiments in a Village	RC Mody	242
Hoaxes of Spirituality	Narendra Nayak	246
News and Notes		249
- French Move To Reinforce Secular State		
- "Adulterers" Stoned To Death		
- Germany Sees Spike in Conversions to Islam		
- Notice from IHEU		

IHEU STRATEGIC PLAN 2007 – 2011

At its recent meeting in Oostende, Belgium, the Annual Planning meeting of the IHEU's EC issued a 5 year Strategic plan. *Extracts:*

Mission: The mission of IHEU is to build and represent the global humanist movement that defends human rights and promotes humanist values worldwide.

Aims: The long term strategic aims of IHEU are: **To promote** Humanism as a non-theistic life stance throughout the world. **To represent** humanists within the international community and organisations. **To defend** human rights and the rights of humanists. **To develop** organised Humanism in every part of the world. **To build** a strong and effective global organisation.

Strategy: To pursue our aims we will: Promote the identity of Humanism including the name and symbol of Humanism. Promote the IHEU Amsterdam Declaration 2002 on Humanism. Promote freedom of religion and belief. Work for separation of religion and state throughout the world. Focus on activities that can only be undertaken by a global organisation. Work closely with our member organisations. Support our members in their campaigns and activities. Bring our members together at conferences and in regional groups. Help establish IHEYO as the world humanist youth organisation. Use strategic alliances to pursue our aims.

Activities: IHEU needs to focus its activities to maximise effectiveness. Core IHEU activities are:

1. **International conferences:** to bring humanists together and inspire them.
2. **Campaigns and PR:** to promote and defend human rights, humanist values, education and science against religious fundamentalism.
3. **Representation** at international and regional bodies: to further humanist goals.
4. **Growth and development:** to support humanist groups in developing countries.
5. **Administration:** operational management, finance and membership records.
6. **Organizational development:** to increase the effectiveness of IHEU and its MOs.
7. **Education and training:** in humanist principles, leadership and group development, PR, human rights, discovery science and critical thinking.

To carry out these activities effectively we need to strengthen our capability in:

Communications, marketing and public relations.

Fund raising: to sustain current activities and finance new projects.

Source : International Humanist News, December 2006.

EDITORIAL



Reject RAP Morality and RAP God

Since words are the only weapons with which the battles of ideas can be fought, those who are fighting for a new idea invariably start off with a disadvantage: their opponents are better armed with a well-established vocabulary strengthened by usage, custom and historical associations. New words may have to be coined, or old ones assigned a slightly different meaning, to express a new idea clearly. The survival and growth of the new word-idea combination depends almost as much upon the acceptability of the word as on the strength of the new idea. T H Huxley's 'agnosticism' (1869) and G J Holyoake's 'secularism' (1846) represent two successful innovations that have had a great influence on the development of Humanist thought.

In the Humanist discourse on morality, however, there still seems to be a need to develop an adequate vocabulary. Narsingh Narain says: *"We have to take note of two categories of good social behaviour; one being that which is motivated by hope of gain or approbation, or fear of loss or disapprobation.... and the other on a sense of values inherent in human nature and requiring no external sanction. The latter alone deserves to be called 'moral', I do not know any name for the former but will call it 'lawabiding' ... It is basic to our position that morality and lawabidingness should be clearly distinguished and disentangled from each other."*

However, it does not seem appropriate to characterise behaviour based on hope of reward or fear of punishment as lawabidingness. A person can (and most people do) adhere to the law because they consider it the right thing to do, and not out of fear of punishment - and the question of earning rewards for adhering to the law does not even seem to arise. In fact, it can be argued that lawful and unlawful behaviour belong to a different (though not entirely separate) domain from moral behaviour. Perhaps the most suitable word to describe good behaviour based on hope of reward or fear of punishment is 'Godfearing' morality; except that in current usage (and in dictionaries) it is generally used as a term of approbation. A Godfearing man is meant to be a virtuous man. Rap (reward-and-punishment) morality is clearer, and has no such flattering associations. Also, we should note the fact that the existing word 'rap' reinforces the intended meaning.

The concept of rap morality leads to its source: a rewarding and punishing God. When Einstein said: "The main source of the present-day conflicts

between the spheres of religion and science lies in the concept of a personal God.” he most probably meant a rewarding and punishing God. Others have used the terms ‘anthropomorphic’ God and ‘interventionist God’. The term ‘rap God’ is more direct and explicit, and establishes an immediate connection with rap morality.

Within the Humanist movement there has always been a certain amount of difficulty in evolving a common approach to the various ideas covered by words like atheism, non-theism and agnosticism. New words, such as apatheism and irrelevantheism, have also been suggested. Atheists mostly reject all concepts of God (including those of eg Spinoza and Einstein). Non-theists presumably ignore the question of the existence or non-existence of God; and agnostics declare that they do not (or cannot) know. A pragmatic Humanist position in this matter would be that the Humanist Movement, as such, ignores the various claims about the existence of God as having no relevance to the practical conduct of human affairs, *except that it categorically rejects the idea of a rewarding and punishing God who intervenes in human affairs*. In other words: Humanism is not concerned with the God of the philosophers; and rejects the God of the moralists. There should be no difficulty in achieving near-unanimity among Humanists on this formulation.

The Humanist Minimum Statement could then be recast thus: “*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, in the sense that it ignores the various claims about the existence of God as having no relevance to the practical conduct of human affairs, except that it categorically rejects the idea of a rewarding and punishing God who intervenes in human affairs. It does not accept a supernatural view of reality.*” (Variations emphasised)

In Spring 1966 a Manifesto adopted by the Indian Humanist Union (article 5) stated: “*Belief in an anthropomorphic God, who listens to prayers, grants boons and gives rewards and punishments; and belief in revelation, prophets and incarnations are inconsistent with the Humanist outlook. Theism not accompanied by such beliefs, as well as atheism and agnosticism, are consistent with Humanism.*”

By giving a name to the type of God, and the type of morality, we reject we will make the task of clarifying the basic Humanist position to the followers of traditional religions a little easier.

Vir Narain

A HUMANIST ALTERNATIVE FOR THE DALITS

- Vidya Bhushan Rawat

The emancipation of Dalits started as an essentially Humanist movement, but as the movement grew politically, the Humanist element has been lost. It is high time the Humanist alternative be made available again to the Dalits, writes V.B. Rawat.

Dr. Ambedkar's Revolution

Through his writings on the Indian social structure, through his analysis and criticism of Hindu thought and mythology, and through the political mobilization of the masses around their problems, Dr. Ambedkar, himself a Dalit and also father of the Indian Constitution, inaugurated a social and political revolution in which the Dalits were active participants. Underlying this approach was Dr. Ambedkar's realization that political empowerment of the Dalits was possible only on the basis of a social revolution.

Dr. Ambedkar's sophisticated strategy put the Dalits on a course of personal liberation while at the same time mobilizing them as a community of victims. His strategy never ignored the individual: "Unlike the drop of water that merges its existence with the ocean in which it drops, man does not lose his entity in the society in which he lives. Man's life is independent. He is not born for the service of the society but for his selfdevelopment," he wrote. This is a Humanist approach, consonant with M.N. Roy's idea that "Freedom of society must be the totality of the freedom of individuals ... the doctrine that the individual should sacrifice for the benefit of welfare and progress of society is fallacious. That it is not a liberating but an enslaving doctrine."

Like the other backward castes that fought hard in the early 1900s, the Dalits too made impressive contributions to the spread of Humanistic values. Seeking the human dignity that was denied them for centuries by upper caste Hindus, they fought against the scriptures authored by the priestly class, and they defied the divinely ordained caste system. Both Dr. Ambedkar's approach and the movement that was inspired by him was essentially a Humanistic struggle.

The Revolution is Lost

Today this very Dalit revolution has reached an impasse because its character has changed. As Dalits become progressively involved in electoral politics, there is a steady move away from emphasis on individual emancipation. To mobilize people in electoral politics the leadership of the Dalits is emphasizing their caste identity – today's Dalit movement and its new leaders would rather consolidate caste identities than create a casteless society.

The important north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is a case in point. Here, for the first time, Ms. Mayawati, a powerful Dalit woman became Chief -

Source: International Humanist News, December 2006

Humanist Outlook - Spring - 2007

Minister. Mayawati and her colleagues built a political movement under the leadership of the recently deceased astute political strategist Kanshi Ram. They mobilized the Dalits and the other backward castes, and fashioned them into a powerful and influential vote bank. And then they struck an alliance with the Hindu political party the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and came to power holding onto their coat tails. The leadership of the Dalits – including many intellectuals, applauded this development, but they did not stop to ask how Dalits could seek the support of a political party which represents the crass interests of the upper caste Hindus – and which was responsible for the genocide of 2000 Muslims in Gujarat state. At the same time as praising Dr. Ambedkar’s explosive work ‘Annihilation of Caste’, they now seek an alliance with the casteist and political Hindus. Social development is not on their agenda, as it does not fetch you publicity. Through these opportunistic alliances and the loss of focus, the revolution has lost its moral character. They have ended up with an alliance with the oppressor, rather than create a Humanist alternative to the Hindu mindset!

As the ideological fight has turned into an ‘identity’ struggle, Humanism and Human values do not necessarily inform it anymore. In Uttar-Pradesh, many Dalit activists have set up their own God men who are sucking the life blood of the community. Today, to many Dalits, a priest is bad only if he is a Brahmin by birth – but good if he is a Dalit. In Kushinagar where the Social Development Foundation works, I was aghast to see how the poor Mushahar (an untouchable community) women were being exploited by a local Tantrik who is also a Dalit (Dushadh). Many years ago, an ideologue of the Dalit movement asked me not to be too critical of Lord Rama as he was a ‘Kurmi’, a backward community person. I was not aware of this lineage of Lord Rama, since he is considered to be a Kshatriya. In anycase, my reaction was “So what if he was a Kurmi? His life does not inspire me!” Similarly, attempts are made to suggest that the Buddha was either a tribal or a Saakya. It is sad when you like the Buddha not for what he has said or done, but for what his caste was.

Once the egalitarian thrust is lost, the first victims are amongst the Dalit community which itself is made of different castes. The community of scavengers literally carries the burden of tradition by cleaning human excreta manually and transporting night soil. Unfortunately, this community, called the Valmiki, feels alienated from the wider Dalit movement in India – as the lowest amongst the Dalits, they do not have the support of the rest of the Dalits – and hence they do not get a share of the benefits that accrue to the Dalit community despite the sudden spurt in the number of donor agencies and NGOs taking an interest in their plight.

We in the SDF have been involved in a struggle for reclamation of 1167 acres of land from a private company in Shaheed Uddham Singh Nagar. Some

150 Dalit families were tilling this land which had been declared ceiling surplus under the Land Ceiling Act which limits the amount of land one can hold in India. In 1990 the industrial house demolished the Dalit colony – and it took us 14 years to obtain a judgement in favour of the Dalits. We have seen how the victims have been used by a large number of human right organizations for political and other ends. Even Dalit groups have been guilty of this.

Getting it Right

Ambedkar condemned India's village system, terming it a 'den of feudalism, corruption and nepotism'. These words are as true as they were in the past – yet many of the NGOs which are working to 'emancipate' the Dalits continue their glorification of India's past and of our village system. This is because many of these NGOs are religious and are driven by the religious value system. Also, religion, rather than the welfare of these people is their main agenda.

Religiosity dis-empowers the marginalized. The poor, marginalized communities are sandwiched between different Gods and their different followers. When we focused on the issue of Mushahars, a community of rat eaters who were dying of hunger and starvation, a few 'God-fearing' activists came over and asked me whether the community members wished to convert to another religion. My answer to them was that the first priority of the Mushahars was to get two meals a day.

While the problem is in, and with, religion the Dalit movement faces a grave danger from those religious groups which suggest that there is liberation through conversion to Christianity and to Islam. Conversion to either of these religions has not really helped them in their struggle for emancipation – on the otherhand it has turned them apolitical. Except for Ambedkar's conversion which was really a political conversion (Buddhists Dalits are highly motivated and active with a Humanist vision) conversion to either Islam or Christinaity has not really helped, even if they are better than the brahmanical system. Those who are motivated by the desire to preserve Hinduism insist that the scriptures do not discriminate against them! When we report that people are dying of hunger in the remote corners of the country, the religious gangs pack their bags with bibles and food and set out for these villages to 'save' their souls; and the Hindus scramble to the affected areas to 'save' the victims from being converted. None seem interested in empowering them.

Starting Again

What binds the Dalits together is a common-sense of denial of dignity by the brahmanical system, a denial of justice by religious scriptures and religious system. What they fear is violence by the dominant upper castes and also by those in power – including the police and the administration. Since the Dalits

Continued on Page 234

ATROCITIES ON WOMEN THROUGH THE AGES

Zoya Zaidi

Ages have come, and ages have gone. Eras will come and eras will go, but the plight of women is likely to remain so...For eons, time has helplessly watched excesses done on women: discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression, humiliation, you name it and women have suffered it...Four steps backward accompany that each step forward in improving the condition of women...

The imprisonment and consistent, repeated rape of women in **fascistic Germany** was “justified” under the pretext of producing a superior race...The “**Comfort women of Japan**” during the second world war, kept quiet for 50 long years - till they were old and weak - before they could muster enough courage, and public support, to raise their voice and speak about the tortures they had to go through. Back home, the ten thousand odd **Widows of Vrindavan**, marginalized and ostracized by society, live in institutionalized hell, being exploited by a politicians-pimps nexus, just because of the heinous practices of a society where widow-remarriage is a taboo, where a widow is supposed to be a “bad omen” for any unmarried, or married, woman...

The **Devdasi** system still persists in South Indian temples. If you take the country road from Dharwad, Karnataka, you will reach the small temple village of Saundatti in South India. It is in this village that the *devdasi* tradition, one of the most criticized forms of prostitution in India, is still practiced. Where a young unmarried girl is “married to the temple” - “given away” in matrimony to God! She “serves” the priests and inmates of the temple, and the Zamindars and other men of money and power, in the town and village. The “service”(read sexual satisfaction) done to these men is considered akin to service of God...She is dedicated to this service of the Temple Deity for life...there is no escape for her...Even if she wants to escape, the society would not accept her.... Despite the governmental ban, initiated in the 1980s, hundreds of girls are secretly dedicated to Goddess Yellamma every year. The *devdasi* system is still flourishing in parts of the country, especially southern India.”*¹

Apart from the above-mentioned institutionalized exploitation of women, there are age-old customs, which have been perpetuated by the so-called “policemen of the culture” and society: “Sati”(*Sati* (Su-thi, a.k.a. suttee) is the traditional Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre), “Sati” means a virtuous woman. A woman who dies burning herself on her husband’s funeral fire was considered most virtuous, and was believed to directly go to heaven, redeeming all the forefathers rotting in hell, by this “meritorious” act. The woman who committed Sati was worshipped as a Goddess,

and temples were built in her memory.”

“Sati was prevalent among certain sects of the society in ancient India, who either took the vow or deemed it a great honor to die on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Ibn Batuta (1333 A.D.) has observed that the Hindus considered Sati praiseworthy, without however being obligatory. The Agni Purana declares that the woman who commits sahagamana goes to heaven. However, Medhatiti pronounced that Sati was like suicide and was against the Shastras, the Hindu code of conduct. It is believed that they were not coerced, although several wives committed Sati. The majority of the widows did not undergo Sati.”

Indian leader Rajaram Mohan Roy, through his organization Brahma Samaj was among the first who fought to eliminate Sati. The British Government banned the ritual of sati in 1829. However, it took large-scale social reforms by Dayanand Saraswati (of Arya Samaj), Mahatma Gandhi and the like to actually stop the practice. In the modern times, there was one instance of a Sati reported in Rajasthan (late 1980s), and another in Madhya Pradesh (in 2002) that caused a lot of controversy and social turmoil:

The tradition of committing Johar, by jumping in a well of fire after their men lost a war, by Rajput women of warrior sect (Harlon 1995:80), to save their honour at the hands of the enemy, was considered an epitome of wifely devotion and a heroic act of honour

Sati, though abolished way back in 1829 by the British Government, is glorified even today in the 21st century, the famous case of Rup Kanwar in 1987, in Rajasthan, is a glaring example of that, when thousands and million gathered to pay their obeisance to “Sati Mata”-in other words to watch the “Tamasha”! About forty cases have taken place in India since independence in 1947. Twenty-eight of these cases have occurred in Rajasthan alone, mainly around Sirkar district (Oldeburg 1992: 191)

The term “Dowry-Death” is coined in India and nowhere else in the world. This custom of paying the dowry to the groom, by the girl’s father, has become so deeply engrained in the system, is such an unquestioned, undisputed part of the social custom, that it has led to a literal “girl-hatred” in the family: when ever a baby girl is born, (if it is allowed to be born), people console each other by saying: “Doesn’t matter, a baby girl is also your own child!” The fathers either virtually “sell-themselves” or become involved neck deep in debt to marry their daughters off (marry “off”). It is such a big matter of “family honour and pride”, that they would rather commit suicide, then question this custom!

According to an article in Time magazine, deaths in India related to
Humanist Outlook - Spring - 2007 229

dowry demands have increase 15-fold since the mid-1980s from 400 a year to around 5,800 a year by the middle of the 1990s: “Of the 1,133 cases of “unnatural deaths” of women in Bangalore in 1997, only 157 were treated as murder while 546 were categorized as “suicides” and 430 as “accidents”‘ But of 550 cases reported between January and September 1997, 71 percent were closed as ‘kitchen/cooking accidents’ and ‘stove-bursts’.

From this stems the so-called “demand” for “baby boy”. People would go to any length to see to it that a baby boy is born, or to put it simply: that **a baby girl is prevented from being born**. With the advent of “**Ultrasonography**”, this task has been made easier by the scientific gadgets of today: Now as soon as the sex of the baby is determined (though banned as illegal by law in 1994), as that of a girl’s, she is easily aborted, no evidence, no trace of the “crime”, crime, that never was committed, because the baby was never “born”! This has lead to the coinage of the term: “Missing Girls”. According to the study report in 2001- To every one thousand boys born, there are only 992 girls born in India, as against the expected number of 1000. Haryana and Punjab (one of the most prosperous states of India) take the cake in this race against the birth of baby girl; the figures are a shocking 793 girls to 1000 boys* A total of 10 million girls foetuses have been aborted, according to a study report recently, in the last twenty years, after the introduction of Ultrasound technique in India. Nearly 500,000 female fetuses are lost to selective abortion in India “Of the 15 million illegal abortions carried out the in the world in 1997, India accounted for four million, 90% of which were intended to eliminate the girl child.”

This is the status of “**Female Foeticide**” in India alone...(selective abortion exists in China, Singapore and Malaysia as well, apart from other third world countries). “According to a recent report by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) up to 50 million girls and women are missing from India’ s population as a result of systematic gender discrimination in India. In most countries in the world, there are approximately 105 female births for every 100 males.

Rape, the worst of the crimes that can be committed against women, according to 2000 figures, is so rampant that it seems a rape is committed every 56 seconds in India (Statistics from 2000 showed that on average a woman is raped every hour in India). In another study: The official statistics of 1991, one woman I molested every 26 minutes; where as if the unreported cases are taken to account, it would be a matter of seconds rather than minutes.

In Delhi alone, which has become the “Rape-Capital of India”, in last one year (2005) alone, according to a recent report, on an average one rape was committed a day. Rape of a South African model just before New Year’s Eve, and a French woman has made Delhi internationally notorious...

Girls are being sold for money in Hyderabad, by their own parents to old Arab Sheikhs, and from other states like Bihar and Bengal and even Bangladesh, to land owners of Punjab, Haryana, Western UP and Rajasthan. “Qazi-Arab bride groom nexus investigation by Deccan Chronicle revealed that around 3000 Hyderabad Muslim girls are virtually ‘sold off’ by poor parents to rich old Saudis every year. About 90% of them are said to be working as domestic maids and comfort women and only a few of them are honoured as wives.”¹¹

Family violence is so common that it is considered the “order of the day”, women accept it quietly, and think it is their “destiny”, their “fate”! **Incest** is as rampant as can be children. . Delhi organisation RAHI said 76% of abuse cases in women were of childhood, of which 40% were by family members¹². Recently some cases have come to light, which are hair raising in their nature: The case of a Father in Lucknow, who has a child each from both his daughters, the mother is so terrified that she takes their delivery herself... they dare not complain...To cap it all, when arrested, the father was remorseless, saying: “There is only one function of a woman in this world: ‘To satisfy the man!’

The famous case of **Gudia**, who became a toy in the hands of the “Maulanas”, who finally succumbed to SLE, a totally curable disease, if diagnosed in time, and given proper treatment (I, as a Rheumatologist, know this very well)...

The case of Imrana, is another eye opener. Raped by father-in-law, and declared outlawed for her husband, the father of her children, and forced into further living with father-in-law. It is ridiculous, yet practiced and sanctified, and to top it all, even accepted, in the name of “Religious Fatwa”... In short women and society are at war with each other...let us see, who emerges a victor?

In conclusion I would like to share two of my poems written about women, First one called: “Woman Burning Bright”, is about excesses on women through the ages; the other written on eight of March 2002 is titled: “Eight of March (an introspection)”.



Number of convictions that have been handed down so far under India’s 1996 law to ban sex- determination tests : 1

Estimated number of female fetuses that have been selectively aborted there since then : 4,500,000.

Source: Harper’s Index, Harper’s Magazine, September 2006

Woman Burning Bright

Centuries have come and centuries have gone,
Moment-to-moment I burn along...
Life is burning desert sand...

Pooja lamp, I burn so bright
Without a wick, with incandescent light...

In hell-fire-of-separation, I burn,
My beloved, unconcerned...

Bowl of poison, I drink without a hitch,
Like *Meera**, my moon is eclipsed...

I have stood the "Test-of-Fire"
With *Sita*** , on burning pyre...

Like a candle melts my soul,
Moths a thousand, encircle close...

My womb's scorched again and again,
A mother, I love without a gain...

My forehead, Vermillion-dyed,
In bright-red flames, a "Burning-Bride..."

Still, I burn on the "Funeral-Pyre",
As a "*Sati*", much to my ire...

As one born out of a litter,
I was sold to the highest bidder...

Quietly, in the womb done away
I never saw the light of the day...

"Wood burns to coal, coal to ashes,
I burn so, neither coal nor ashes..."

Centuries have come, and centuries have gone,
Moment-to-moment, I burn along...
Humanity is a barren desert land....

□

**Eighth of March
(An introspection)**

It's 8th of March,
I stayed at home,
I did not celebrate!
The silence of death reigned in the streets,
My soul was inundate
With cries of helpless women & children,
That echoed with impotent rage:
The baby girl in the womb smiles
Innocently at me:
"Save me! From my death!"
She cries,
"Death before I'm even born!
From being stifled in my womb,
I want to escape my watery tomb,
And see the world in its bloom..."

The girl in rags on the street,
Grins impishly at me:
Oblivious of the shame and neglect,
Ignorance, and abject poverty...

The precocious child-woman,
Of forbidden nooks of society,
Sneers at me jeeringly:
"What have you done?
To save my flesh,
From the devilish trade
Of innocent femininity?"

The "burning bride",
With anguish cries:
"Save me, from "my Savior",
-My cruel "Companion of Eternity!"-
For oppressed centuries..."

The mother Earth hangs
Her head in shame:
"What has become of my children?
To bring about this carnage of humanity,
To dance this bloody dance
Of savage brutality?"

I ponder, muse and introspect:
“What have I done?
To alleviate their pain,
To maintain life’s sanctity?

What right have I to celebrate?
To rejoice insanity?
The time has come
To break the chains,
To free myself of my own pain,
To do something,
This little something,
To save humanity:
The virgin femininity...



Continued from Page 227

have been victims of religious values and a society based on religiously ordained and sanctioned caste, it is humanist values which can bring them dignity and human rights.

We have therefore to introduce Humanism and Humanist values to all our developmental programmes. Our aim is clear. We do not want the Dalits to suppress themselves with the burden of God, be that a Christian God or a Muslim God or a Hindu God. For us, the concept of God itself is the creation of an exploitative society and the sooner we get rid of it, the better it would be for entire society. We do not wish the Dalits to ‘convert’ to Humanism; but we will have to create a humanist alternative for the Dalits – this is what Dr. Ambedkar did when he identified Buddhism as an option for Dalits.

Cultural emancipation and economic empowerment of the Dalits will mean their liberation from the shackles of religion and the oppression of the idea of God. It will mean the Dalits obtaining training in alternative livelihood skills. This will necessitate offering them training and education in practical skills as well as in universal human rights and in Humanism. Dalits are entering the Humanist movement of their own accord. When Humanists themselves take the initiative to reach out to the Dalits, the results will be dramatic.



Vidya Bhushan Rawat is leader of Delhi-based IHEU Member Organisation Social Development Foundation, and an activist for Dalit Rights. He has recently made a film on the plight of the rat catcher community in North India.

MORABUFFALOES, MOTHER'S DAY AND FREEDOM

- Chitra Narain

Strange are the perambulations of memory. Quite recently, during the Bush visit, I saw, on a TV Channel, one of our prized buffaloes refusing to yield milk before the U.S. President! The buffalo was referred to as Maru, but I knew immediately that she was one of the famed 'Mora' buffaloes of Haryana, who, for years, have beaten all records in their yield of milk. I first met their tribe almost thirty years ago- no not in India- but in Vietnam, when our (media) delegation, on a goodwill tour of Vietnam, was taken to the Buffaloes and Meadows Research Centre in Song Be Province some distance from Saigon. . The U.S. troops had recently quit- (or was it fled) Vietnam unable to face the grit and determination of the Vietnamese, but leaving this proud country quite devastated, bare of even the basics needed for survival. It was at this time that the Indian government rushed in aid, and one of the most precious gifts was 500 Mora buffaloes from Hissar, whose milk saved thousands of Vietnamese children, as well as the wounded and sick, from malnutrition, disease and death. When I watched on TV the buffalo stubbornly refusing to display her munificence before President Bush, a mischievous thought crossed my mind. Perhaps her granny was among the lot sent to Vietnam, and had told her about the horrendous treatment of that country by the U.S! Now she was showing her ire! Obviously her memory- and moral outrage- was not as short-lived as us humans!

Bicycles, Baker's Biscuits and Mother's Day.

The drive from the airport to Hanoi, Vietnam's Capital, was through miles of what must have been lush forest and farmland, now laid waste by napalm. But signs of vigorous rebuilding were evident. Dotted the entire countryside were scores of the very young and the very old, wielding both hoe and gun, one eye on the earth and the other scanning the sky. Never again would they be caught napping. The wages of war had wiped out an entire generation of soldiers and farmers...

One could say that the streets of Hanoi were paved with bicycles.... Thousands of them like an avalanche, heralding life not death. Twice a day we watched from our hotel window this most fascinating sight, once in the morning and then at sundown. Beautiful young people, mostly girls, in loose black trousers and white shirts, conical straw hats worn over kerchiefs fastened at the chin, but with the ubiquitous rifle slung across the shoulder, bicycling to and from work, chattering, laughing, singing.... a sight unparalleled in any city of the world... Cars were a rarity, even on the main thoroughfares, used only by the top brass, chary not to disturb the symphony of cycles.

Within the Hotel, the warm and generous hospitality could scarce disguise the acute shortage of essentials such as bread, butter and milk. One felt almost guilty tucking into cornflakes and toast, knowing full well the situation on the ground. I could sense the acute embarrassment felt by the young woman attached to us for our personal needs, when she hesitatingly asked me if I could pick up some baker's biscuits for her child when we visited the duty-free shop, the only place they were available. This coveted shop, the "dollar shop", looked poor and forlorn compared to its appetising counterparts in other cities of the world. Its most prized displays were Soviet fountain pens, leatherite wallets, 555 State Express cigarettes, Hungarian Brandy and, of course, baker's biscuits! I bought up several packets and gifted them to a visibly overwhelmed young lady. Could this have happened anywhere else in the world, I wondered.

While in the capital, I was to interview Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnam's dynamic and most personable Foreign Minister. On the appointed day, I woke up with a fever, so decided to skip the morning's engagements to be well enough to meet the minister in the afternoon. It would be a chance to relax and catch up with my diary...the others had left and the hotel was peaceful and quiet...when the doorbell rang. At the door were two smiling faces-a young woman and a man, barely out of their teens. "Happy Mother's Day"! They beamed, presenting me with a bouquet of flowers, a card and a box of chocolates. For a moment I was speechless..Was it Mother's Day? Thousands of miles away from home and my kids, there was no way of knowing...I almost cried as I asked them in and thanked them. Their flushed happy smiles reminded me of my own children.... My day was made..I already felt better and fit enough to meet a king!

555 and Freedom

Nothing could have been more different to old Hanoi than Saigon, now Hochi Minh City, the once pulsating city of U.S. occupation, with its bursting markets, glittering hotels and bawdy sailor's clubs. Everywhere, the pall of the past hung like a thick curtain, clouding judgement, exposing the confusion and contradictions of sudden freedom. The painful change from a booming dollar city to shortages and unemployment, like a carnival abruptly ended and the young dancers not knowing where to go.... Overnight, Vietnamese girls, married to American GI's, found themselves abandoned, and had taken to the streets, and their rehabilitation had become a formidable task. Saigon presented the most daunting challenge of all - that of repairing the scarred Vietnamese spirit....

We were put up in the hotel where the U.S troops had been lodged during the occupation. The waiters were more chatty than those of the north. And the waitresses wore heavy make-up to mask their tired and drawn faces, ravaged, no doubt, by the so called good life. Saigon-whether inside the hote

or outside-was littered with its Yankee past. Pavement markets, like our very own export seconds at Jama Masjid, had sprouted all over, with hawkers squatting on the ground, offering every manner of American goodies left behind in a hurry – the most expensive cameras and wrist watches, brand new Samsonite suitcases and, though they were oblivious of its value, exquisite Chinese porcelain! Here one could pick up any of these for a couple of cartons of 555 cigarettes (a national addiction but available only in our hotel) that had a premium over even the prized dollar!

The exhausting field trips and cultural functions and dinners hosted in our honour, left us no time to be footloose and fancy-free. How we longed to break loose from our watchful hosts and roam the streets unguarded, unhindered, free to shout, sing, dance, mingle with the common folk and do just about anything. It was our last evening. Our hosts had seen us to our rooms after dinner and there was no one around. So the more daring of our group crept out of the hotel and decided to explore this unknown, fascinating city..We felt like naughty schoolchildren playing hookie after lights out! We were in search of high adventure, ever ready to invent a story to relate to our colleagues the next morning. Our spirits were soaring, our guffaws reaching a crescendo, when suddenly, out of nowhere, we heard a voice “hi there!” Coming towards us was a cycle-rickshaw, and perched on it a pixie like Vietnamese in jeans and t-shirt, with a peak cap placed rakishly on a small head. “Hi folks” his voice was friendly, “wanna rickshaw ride?” This is it, I thought, and grabbing the arm of my friend, hopped in. “The American Hotel” I said, sure that he would understand. “ Oh! The yanks were staying there “he grinned...” damn nice guys! So generous...Its all over now” I waited for more. It all sounded so much like some Indians felt after the Raj ended. But first he wanted to make sure. “You’re tourists?” I told him we were from India, invited by his government. That India was anxious to help. “You know” he went on in heavy Yankee accent, things are reel bad here...not enough of anything.” I knew he was right, but I decided to mention the aid that was pouring in from various countries. “Aw! That sure doesn’t come to us...only some lucky fell as...” And then like a gunshot “Ma’am, you seem important...Can you help me get outta here.... to come to India... Yours is a great country.” He was almost pleading. Our hotel was within sight. I told him that India was not a bed of roses...that we were still grappling with problems of development, that we had poverty and unemployment too...that it would take time.... By now we had reached the hotel. I paid him some dollars and hopped off..I was glad I had convinced him...As I walked away, he shot bask “But lady, You are free! At least you have freedom!”

Every time I grumble about things being real bad in India, I think about a little guy in a peak cap astride a cycle rickshaw outside our hotel in Saigon.

□

FACES OF GRIEF

Vignettes of gender tribulation from rural Chhattisgarh

- Mousumi Sarkar

I have spent the past five years promoting women's self-help groups (SHGs). This period can be divided in two distinct phases. The first phase was in the Purulia district of West Bengal, where I joined as a Development Associate. It was here that I picked up basic skills required to promote SHGs.

The second phase was in the Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh, where I have been fortunate to initiate SHG activity. Being a woman, I have always been quickly accepted among the women in the villages and have freely mingled with group members, sometimes even discussing personal matters. These interactions have often given me an opportunity to learn about their emotional problems, which mostly seem to be suppressed or neglected.

I describe three instances here. I am yet to figure out a role for myself on these issues. What could I do to prevent this from happening again, and again, and again? I do not have the answers yet.

Financing a Second Marriage

Rathkuer Rathia is a tribal woman with four children. The family depends on agriculture, the forest and wage earnings for a livelihood. Rathkuer is one of the group members of the Saraswati Mahila Mandal promoted by Pradan in Danout village.

She once took a loan of Rs 3,000 for the purpose of 'marriage'. I was present in the meeting and asked her whose marriage it was. She turned to hide the tears rolling down her face. The first thing that struck me was that maybe I was wrong in asking this question. The meeting ended and I did not pursue the matter. It was afterwards that I learned that she was borrowing money for her own husband's second marriage!

Rathkuer's husband brought home another married woman of the same village, with whom he had a long-standing relationship. This woman's husband took the matter to the Rathia Samaj, a village decision-making body consisting of men.

His allegation was that Rathkuer's husband had forcibly taken his wife. He demanded Rs 1,000 as compensation or threatened to take the matter to court. The Rathia Samaj settled the dispute. What did they do? They imposed a fine of Rs 1,000 and a community feast on Rathkuer's husband.

I was so uncomfortable. Firstly, how could a woman accept her husband

marrying another? Secondly, why did she herself take a loan to meet that expenditure? How could the villagers come to terms with the kind of decision the wise men of the village took?

Life as Beating

The second incident happened in the Amaghat village. Philisitabai was a member of a SHG. She is probably the only woman in the village to work all 30 days in a month as agricultural labour. Her contribution to the family's well being far exceeds that of her drunkard husband.

One day her husband beat her up very badly. It all happened in front of the villagers who, along with Philisitabai's brother, rescued her. The three SHGs in Amaghat convened a meeting and asked Philisitabai to leave her husband for a few days. They also called her husband to apologise to her in front of all the members.

Philisitabai did not accept this decision. Not only that, after a few days I came to know that Philisitabai had filed a case against her own brother for interfering in a family quarrel and beating up her husband. When I last went there, I heard that Philisitabai also wanted to leave the SHG.

I have talked to both these women to understand the reasons for such behaviour. In both cases the answer was the same. They say that they have to think of their children. How could a woman manage to live without her husband? It is too difficult, they say.

The Scarlet Woman

Anusua Soni is a vocal member of Om Shanti Mahila Jagriti Samiti in Regra. She did not get on with her husband and was forced to leave him. Anusua returned to her parent's home and got married to another person.

The second marriage did not last long either. She now has three daughters, works in an anganwadi (creche) and earns Rs 200 per month. She also works as an agricultural labour.

In one of the group meetings, a conflict arose between Anusua and Sarifabai, also a member of the same SHG. The conflict was settled by the timely intervention of other group members.

That evening Sarifabai's husband, Iqbal came searching for Anusua. Anusua saw Iqbal and ran, taking shelter in a nearby house. However, Iqbal did not spare Anusua. He beat her and dragged her to Sarifabai's feet.

All this happened in front of some villagers but nobody intervened or

rescued Anusua. The group members and some villagers suggested that Anusua take the case to the police. But Anusua did not agree, fearing that Iqbal might kill her brother.

The SHG then convened a meeting and called Sarifabai and Iqbal. But no one actually dared to call Iqbal. The group members decided to take this matter to the cluster meeting. In between, I kept hearing murmurs from nearby villages that Anusua was of bad character and that she was the cause for everything that happened. If there was a relationship and it was the cause for the quarrel, why did the villagers not blame Iqbal (a father of six children) as he was equally responsible?

This issue was raised in the meeting, too, but no one, including the mahila sarpanch (woman head) dared to summon Iqbal to the forum. Anusua also lost interest in this case and apologised for bringing the issue to the group. Several days later, I heard some group members talking again in low voices about Anusua's bad character.

Mysterious Behaviour

I would like to understand more clearly why these women behaved the way they did. Tribal women in Chhattisgarh have traditionally enjoyed more freedom, something that has perhaps been denied to women in most parts of our country. According to available data and the gender development index, the districts of Chhattisgarh are placed higher than districts of Madhya Pradesh. How can I then accept that there was nothing wrong in the cases of Rathkuer, Philisitabai or Anusua? Are these stray cases that do not reflect or represent the population? Does this happen because of the roles that women play – as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers?

How come I did not come across such strange happenings in Purulia? What happens when we leave such issues to be settled in traditional ways, where men are the arbitrators? Don't we suppress women's feelings and dignity? Don't we deprive them of the voice they should have in running their own lives?

This article was first published in NewsReach April 2001. Mousumi is based in Raigarh in Chhattisgarh.



DR RASHID JEHAN 1905 - 1952

The birth centenary of Dr. Rashid Jehan was celebrated in Aligarh in November last year. Attended by academics, writers and political activists from India and abroad the seminar was an occasion to focus on the life and times, writing and impact of Dr. Rashid Jehan.

Eldest child of Waheed Jehan and Sheikh Abdullah, Rashid Jehan was born in Aligarh in 1905. Her parents pioneered the movement for the education of Muslim women and in this endeavour they had to put up a spirited fight with the conservative elements within the community.. Aligarh was seething with fresh ideas to free the mind from obscurantism initiated by Syed Ahmed Khan and this was the inspiration for Sheikh Abdullah who was a student at the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental (MAO) college in the late nineteenth century . Sir Syed who founded the movement as well as the college for the study of science and modern western education in Aligarh was opposed to the idea of women being educated on modern western lines - this task was taken up by Sheikh Abdullah who had become a Secretary of Female Education a section of the All India Mohammedan Education Conference in 1902.

Thus the home into which Rashid Jehan was born was seething with ideas on womens emancipation and empowerment Her father started a journal 'Khatoon' in 1904 to promote progressive ideas concerning women. Added to this was the impact of Miss Hazra from Calcutta, Headmistress of the girls school who ignited the young minds with ideas raging at the time - Swadeshi, Home Rule, Bengal Partition, Gandhiji to name a few.

Dr. Rashid Jehan's work - mostly short stories and plays are based on a keen observation of life and sound so true and relevant even today. Facets of daily life hasn't changed much since the time it was written - Corruption - the thanedar taking the police officers wife shopping and ensuring that she pays a fraction of the cost, the genesis of a communal riot and the political gains thereof, caste and untouchability, Hypocrisy and the justice delivery system. Being a doctor working intimately with women many of her stories highlight gender issues, health and nutrition denied to women and the overall burden of patriarchy.. In her celebrated story 'Delhi ki Sair the wife who was taken to see Delhi is left at the platform while the husband went off on a jaunt with a friend totally insensitive to her needs collected her from the station, where she had been sitting the whole day, to take her back home. This story has been included in a collection of stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali and Mahmuduzaffar titled 'Angarey' which was banned in 1932 for its progressive, iconoclastic views. It was the clergy and conservative elements that felt threatened who persuaded the British Government to ban the book. The community leaders still feel.

Continued on Page 245

THE STORY OF OUR EXPERIMENTS IN A VILLAGE

-RC Mody

Recently the Indian Academy of Pediatrics - Child Abuse and Neglect & Child Labour (a society of medical and non-medical social workers) has adopted a village, Bhango, about 70 kilometers from Delhi for promoting the healthcare and education of its children. RC Mody recounts his experiences in that village.

Until now, the IAP CANCL has functioned primarily in urban slums. Although the work has been challenging and satisfying, it was realised sometime ago as a result of interactions with the urban slum communities that the solution to their problems ultimately lies in improving the quality of life in our villages. That is the only way to arrest unhealthy migrations from villages to the cities. Urbanisation is a worldwide phenomenon and the flow of populations from rural to urban centres cannot be stopped altogether. However, as long as the inflows into the cities are in response to a genuine increase in their economic activities, the process is both desirable and healthy. But it is not so, if people migrate into cities for illusory benefits, on account of the inability of villages to provide them with work and livelihood. Thus there is obviously a close linkage between improvement in lives in urban and in rural India.

Based on this realisation, the group constituted a four-member team, along with their partner NGO BUDS, to identify a suitable village for launching its first rural experiment. After some search, the choice fell on village Bhango located in the state of Haryana. The focus of the programme continued to be the child, but any measure to help the child necessarily involved all-round development, which would cover the mothers, size and incomes of the families, overall facilities for health and education, water and power supply, environment and so on. The approach thus had to be holistic and inclusive.

After having pinned down on village Bhango, the team started wondering whether they had made the right choice. It was a village situated within 70kms of Delhi, the national capital, accessible by a metalled road, which except for the last 8 km, was a national highway connecting Delhi with the capital of a major state. It was located in a state with the second highest per capita GNP in the country, and was just within an hour's drive from Gurgaon, one of the fastest growing urban centres of India. Will it need the service which our group planned to render; in other words, will the team to which the work was being entrusted have enough job satisfaction? As they proceeded with their work, the following facts about village B unfolded themselves.

General

The team's first task after arriving in village B was to contact the *Sarpanch* (village headman i.e. the head of the Panchayat). They found that the position was held by a lady who had delegated her work and responsibilities to her son who had not taken them seriously. He had no clear idea of even the number of persons inhabiting the village, far less of its problems. He only blamed the revenue officials for not taking him into confidence and sharing with him the required information. The conclusion which the team had to draw was that the village was, for all practical purposes, without a Panchayat and it could not depend upon this institution for any help and guidance.

The Village Centre from where the *Sarpanch* is expected to function was non operational. The premises were unclean and ill-kept and appeared never to have been used as a meeting place of village elders or common inhabitants. There were no books, newspapers or periodicals kept there, which could attract village folk to it..

The population of the village, as the team could ascertain from revenue officials was around 3000, of whom 592 (exact number) were adults. The age of marriage was low and practically the entire adult population comprised married men/women. The average number of children per family was estimated to be nine (the number was up to twelve in some cases). Family planning guidance was nominal and was in any case, ineffective.

Education:

The village has a Primary Government school providing education up to 5th standard. It is located in a Government building, a little away from the city centre, which had a large compound and had four rooms. Grant had been provided for an additional room. Government had provided the school with four qualified teachers - all of them very well paid by Indian standards. There was also provision for mid-day meals to be served on all school days. The situation on the ground, however, was different. The number of children enrolled in the school is a mere 148 (107 boys and 41 girls). The number of children of school-going age in the village as per a rough estimate is not less than 700. It appeared to be no one's concern to find out why such a large number of children were not enrolled. Besides, there is no attempt to find out why hardly 12% of the village girls of eligible age had been enrolled. Drop out rate, it was learnt, was high but there seemed to be no effort to ascertain its causes and remedy them. Only one of the four school rooms was usable for conducting classes. The rest were either in a dilapidated condition or used for storing materials. The school administration did not appear concerned and was not taking any steps to remedy the situation. They were content with conducting classes in open compound with children seated on the floor, on half torn mats.

The mid day meals provided under the rules were served irregularly, they said, for lack of funds. The school premises had no proper urinals which in any case were not usable by girl students. Above all, the school does not function for all its allotted hours on many of the prescribed working days; it is often closed down early and at times not opened at all. Quite often one or more of the teachers do not turn up. They are on leave or absent clandestinely; at times, they say, they are allotted other government duties connected with elections or census operations. The school head master was absent for several weeks at a stretch during August-September 2006 when our team started visiting the village, on grounds of some orthopedic problem. And most unfortunately, even when present, the teachers do not always teach; they are often engaged in non-teaching work e.g. purchases of some materials for the school or work in connection with repairs to the school building which in any case remains in a dilapidated condition. Teaching, in short, is not their first priority. The school compound, though large, is ill kept, the compound walls crumbling. There are no facilities for games and sports for which the compound could have been gainfully used.

In this scenario the quality of education could hardly be adequate. The standard of English and general awareness, for which our team put some of the students to an informal test, were found to be dismal. None of the Class V students could tell as to who was the Prime Minister of India, at a place so close to the national capital.

Health service.

There was no Government dispensary in the village. The nearest primary health centre is almost 5 km away accessible by a *kuccha* road and with no public transport. The general standard of health was low. Womenfolk were particularly handicapped due to the number of confinements they underwent. The awareness of benefits of family planning was minimal. Children were malnourished, anemic and poorly immunized.

The task before our team:

After ascertaining the position described above, our team which, to start with, was diffident about what it could possibly do in a village located in such a privileged part of the country, found that there was enough on its plate. There was originally, the problem of winning credibility with the village folks. Each time the team visited, its medical member took up medical examination of all those who came forward for it. From the second visit onwards, he had a long queue standing before him. He would patiently examine all, and in most cases give them on the spot the medicines they required. The Lady Doctors who accompanied the team on most occasions examined the pregnant women gave them medicines as well as counselling. The village centre, lying unused was

got cleaned up and equipped with books for general reading, toys and also medicines of common use, all procured by our team . Soon the team found themselves involved with the village folk.

But all that was not enough to gain access to the village school. After efforts the team could meet the Deputy Commissioner (the head of the district) sometime in September 2006 (about a month after it took up the task) at the district headquarters, some 60 kms away from the village, and made him aware of the task they had undertaken. Village Bhango is one of the 500 villages in his district and had never been visited by any district head till then. On the persuasion of our team, he paid a visit to the village a month later, along with a contingent of other district level officers. That day became a red letter day in the history of Bhango. It gave an opportunity to its population to place all their woes and problems before the DC. For our team, it became the starting point for putting on track its plans, particularly in the direction of upgrading the village school which the team considers the kingpin of its strategy.

The team is still in the very early stages of its work. Only time will tell how far it is able to attain its objectives.

The writer is a member of the Executive Council of IHU and President of HEFS. He is a member of the IAP CANCL team working on village uplift. The article is being reproduced from CANCL NEWS, January 2007, with the consent of its publishers.



Continued from page 241

threatened and insecure because, when as recently as 2003 when the Urdu Deptt of AMU planned a seminar of Dr. Rashid Jehan's work, the university authorities were persuaded to cancel it at the last minute. For this reason the seminar commemorating the centenary of the author's birth was organised by an NGO without taking any help from the university.

A founder member of the Progressive Writers Association in Lucknow in 1936, under the influence of Prem Chand, Rashid Jehan was the 'first woman writer in Urdu to address herself forcefully and consistently to the problems pertaining to the plight of women in Indian society'. Her forceful personality and writing has been acknowledged as a source of inspiration by Ismat Chughtai, Qurutulain Hyder and a whole genre of writers and poets in the forties and fifties of the last century. Talat Ahmed a London based teacher currently working on her PhD on the Progressive Writers Movement recalled at the seminar that when she first read Rashid Jehan the stories just pierced her heart despite the fact that she is living so faraway in time as well as space. Talat was thus inspired to take up this particular subject for her dissertation. Dr. Rashid Jehan's ideas which have questioned gender injustice, corruption, hypocrisy in society in her time are as relevant today as they were when written over fifty years ago.



HOAXES OF SPIRITUALITY

Narendra Nayak

One of the latest “in” words is spiritualism and we have any number of proponents of this. One of the recent entrants into this realm is Ravishanker and his art of living. Along with the others like Sudhamani alias Matha Amrithanandamayi, the self styled Bhagvan who calls himself as Satya Sai Baba whose real name is Satya Narayana Raju and many others of their ilk, have spread their tentacles of spiritualism to ensnare the gullible. The recent tamasha of the 50th birthday of Ravishanker who has two Sri’s to his name is another such show. It was two in one- the 25th anniversary of the Art of Living combined with the 50th birthday of its founder.

As accounts go (and as they usually do) Ravishanker was a genius who could recite shlokas from the scriptures at the very young age of four, when his contemporaries were playing with toys and rattles. After joining the founder of the cult of transcendental meditation, Mahesh Yogi, he set out on his own to find his own outfit. For those who have forgotten his mentor, a quick recap. Mahesh Yogi became famous as the guru of the hippie flower generation, The Beatles, Mia Farrow and a number of other icons of the younger generation were his disciples. He advocated recitation of a mantra which would take one to the ultimate level of spiritual ascendancy. Of course, the mantra was a top secret given personally by the guru to initiate and was not to be revealed.

Yours truly, had joined this in 1974; I was initiated into the cult by a teacher who claimed that he was an engineering graduate and very, very scientific in his outlook! I went with my presents to the great guru: a piece of cloth, a flower, a fruit and Rs. 5 cash. I was asked to pray to a picture of this guru (The guru’s guru that is Mahesh Yogi) and when I said I do not pray, he asked me to just stand and watch the ritual. Then I was asked to recite a mantra called Amba, which I did. Then I was asked to shut my mouth and repeat it. I could help a grin (Amba reminded of an eponymous tutor in the physiology department who was very pretty). I was scolded and asked to take things seriously. I mumbled with my closed lips, the same mantra. He then asked me to say that in my mind and I complied. He then said this is in transcendental meditation- go there, sit and meditate. I was really cut up. In those days when I was a student, cash was hard to come and Rs. 5 was a pretty good amount when a coffee and a tuppa dosa could be had for 80 paise! I asked him whether that was all I got for Rs. 5 and he told me that outsiders had to pay 100 US dollars for that!

The next day there was a meeting for the neo-initiates where the teacher was supposed to answer any queries. I asked a question about how a mantra was chosen for an individual, and I also asked him how he chose Amba for me an Om for someone else! The teacher was furious, shouted at me and berated me for revealing the secret mantra. The teacher had warned me after the initiation

Source: Indian Skeptic, June 2006

that the mantra was a secret and should not be revealed to any one! When I queried the teacher as to what would happen to me for revealing the mantra, he was fuming. He said if I want to know the reason for all those, I should become a teacher myself. Then my professor Dr. TN Pattabhiraman, who was also in the audience told him that I am his student, If I ask a question he would give me the answer if he knew it and would not tell me to become professor if I ask any question. Because of this and the teacher's inability to answer their queries, a number of people walked out. But, there is no end to claims of those who promote it.! Sadly for them, they also claimed that those who enlisted for their cult could end up levitating, one Australian who had joined up ended up hopping, sitting on a rubber pad fixed to his backside, like all others who had promised that they would levitate! But, unlike others, he decided to seek legal remedies for this deceit. The foundation had to pay him a heavy compensation! Again, the same foundation had claimed that, if 1% of the population goes in for this, all conflicts all over the world would end and there would be peace! This claim of course, would have come as no one could expect that to happen!

For a cheap, stupid technique like repeating a name hundreds of times, the so called guru and his gang of teachers had the temerity to charge thousands of dollars putting forward outlandish claims. The "spiritual" trend slowly died down in the west, transcendental meditation was disallowed in schools because it was considered a religious ritual. A lot of unsavoury allegations were made about the top leader, particularly about misbehaviour with the opposite sex and nothing much was heard later. As of now, he claims to have an "International University" in Switzerland and claims that transcendental meditation can improve every thing in life, but this has not been taken seriously by anyone.

Coming back to Ravishanker, his claim to fame is the same as his illustrious guru, Mahesh Yogi. According to some, he is said to have been with him and fell out favour before he started his own outfit. One lady, whom I had met in Bangalore, claimed that she had helped him when he was a nobody and he was one of the most ungrateful persons whom she had ever met. She informed me that She had helped him in those days when he was unknown and when he became little know started ignoring her! That apart, it is very clear that the art of living is something for people who have plenty of money and tensions associated with it. The so called Pranayama is a variant of this. While breathing is a process regulated by the centres in the medulla which receive impulses from receptors in the arteries which sense the level of oxygen, carbon dioxide and the hydrogen ion concentration, our attempts to regulate them will cause temporary changes in the level of these. For example, holding the breath causes increase in the levels of carbon dioxide, which in turn increases the hydrogen ion concentration and also decreases the oxygen level. This will cause the respiratory centres to be stimulated and that will cause breathing to start. So, it is not possible to hold one's breath and commit suicide! But, hyperventilation

Humanist Outlook - Spring - 2007 247

can cause blowing of carbon dioxide, leads to respiratory alkalosis and then on to tetany - a state which is due to decreased levels of ionised calcium! This leads to muscular spasms and can be passed off as an effect of Sudarshana Kriya Yoga or whatever it may, because, in this particular breathing exercise, deep breathing is followed by hyperventilation, along with a chanting of ho hum! One thing for which Ravishanker and his gang have to get the due credit. They are masters in the art of publicity. They have managed the rope in some top media owners, highly visible persons and through them manage to get a lot of publicity. His 50th birthday celebration had a lot of politicians on the dais. Though many in the long list did not turn up, some did. He also managed to give live coverage for his bash on some of the TV channels. For a person with a effeminate voice and a “Spiritual” look, he seems to be doing very well. On the other hand, his successful PR exercises shows us how gullible people are. His courses are advertised as ideal for young people, have no religious content etc. But, actually they are subtly promoting Hindutva. The same can be also sensed by the support he receives from the big wigs of the BJP, who all attended his silver jubilee bash at Bangalore.

Again he was not overtly not claimed any miraculous powers, the blurb that Sudarshana Kriya Yoga helps one to lead a stress free-disease free life, subtly suggests that it is a cure for all too. In fact, a seminar held recently at Delhi about spirituality and cancer- had a number of cured cancer patients and Ravishanker was on the dais with his usual blabber of spirituality. The whole proceedings were conducted with an underlying hint that spiritualism was an important part and very much required therapy in the cancer treatment! Again, all devotees are not equal in the eyes of guruji, His Holiness Sri Sri Ravishanker. When he visited Mangalore a few years back, mangala stadium had been hired, but only a few hundred people were there. A stage was made, he was sitting on it wearing grand Mysore turban. The white skinned devotees were on the stage singing some bhajans. The blackies and brownies were sitting at lower level on the ground! His preachings of high thinking and simple living are more directed to his devotees and for public consumption. His devotees sleep in dormitories while he has an air-conditioned accommodation and travels in Mercedes Benz cars! His devotees have to do with two meals a day while we do not know what he eats! All these are personal matters and would not have been anything remarkable, but persons in highly spiritual positions with a holier than thou attitude should practice what they preach.

The art of living or Sudarshana Kriya Yoga shows all the traits of a cult! While one's body may be controlled, intellect may be subordinated, allowing one's mind to be totally under someone's will is the characteristics of a cult. Sudarshana Kriya Yoga with all its meditation, breathing exercises, all that - to be religiously followed and all the followers subordinate to the guru, Ravishanker, Art of Living is a cult controlling the minds of people to suit the dubious ends of this individual.

NEWS AND NOTES

French Move To Reinforce Secular State

A panel appointed by the French government has produced a charter that aims to keep public institutions, including hospitals, the armed forces, schools and government offices, free from religious influence. The document comes in the wake of an assault on a doctor by a young Muslim who objected to his wife being examined by a man when she developed complications after childbirth.

Source: Newslite 02 February 2007

"Adulterers" Stoned To Death

A Pakistani man and a woman were tied to a tree and stoned to death by their families after they were suspected of having an affair outside of marriage. The couple, from the village of Donga Bonga in Bahawalnagar district in southern Punjab, apparently pleaded their innocence but died in an "honour killing" at the weekend in a hail of bricks. Elahi Hussain, a divorcee in her forties, had angered her family by allegedly conducting an affair with a fellow villager, Hafiz Shah, 45. Eventually the couple were tied to a tree and subjected to ten minutes of stoning before they died. Two of the woman's brothers have been arrested and two other suspects are being sought.

Source: Newslite 02 February 2007

Germany Sees Spike in Conversions to Islam

More than 4,000 Germans converted to Islam between July 2004 and June 2005, the daily Der Spiegel reports. That figure is four times as high as the number for the previous year. Based on data from an unpublished study by the Archive of Islam in Soest, Germany, Der Spiegel notes that many Germans are embracing the Muslim faith for purely personal reasons— whereas in the past, many of the converts were women who were adopting the faith in order to marry Muslim men. Mohammed Herzog, a Berlin imam, told Der Spiegel that the trend toward Islam is a sign of resurgent religious interest. "Many converts were formerly Christians, who doubted their religion," he said.

Source: Catholic World News Brief 16-January-2007

Notice from IHEU

The IHEU General Assembly 2007 will be held in Torino (Turin) Italy, on Sunday 17th June 2007 (10.00 am to 5.30 pm) and on Monday 18th June 2007 (9.30 am to 12.30 pm). The venue for the IHEU General Assembly is expected to be Hotel Royal (group Mercure), Corso Regina Margherita 240, 10144 Torino. Tel: +39 011 43 76 777 We very much look forward to welcoming registered delegates (representatives of IHEU member organisations, IHEU international representatives, IHEU Officers, paid-up IHEU individual supporters and invitees) to the IHEU General Assembly 2007.

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