

1. Among the Chosen

12 June 1979 ... Most people who wrote their examination with me must have spent a restless night, and got up early to catch the newspaper hawker as he went by. This was a day of excitement in their lives. All over the country. Today would decide their fate—it would decide whether they were going to be the masters deciding the course of the country or mere toilers in the trenches. If the answer was positive, they would help decide the destiny of the nation at least for the next thirty-five years, some kind of demi-gods who would know what was good and what was bad for the country and who would prescribe medicines for the treatment of a very sick nation. I was very excited the previous night. I was in Delhi and I could have gone to the Union Public Service Commission office where the results of the IAS examination are put out the previous evening. I was not interested in knowing my fate a night earlier. I decided I would sleep peacefully. Most of my friends did go to the UPSC office. I did not ring up any of them to find out whether my name was there. And now it was morning and I was still asleep.

In the month of June, the temperature touches 45°C by noon in Delhi but even at five in the morning, it is already uncomfortably warm. I had a lovely lawn outside my house and I used to pull my cot there late at night when my neighbour had gone off to sleep. I did

Making a Difference

not have an exclusive right to the lawn as I had only a one-room apartment in the house. Therefore I had to wait for the landlord to go to sleep, and then I could have the lawn to myself for the night.

Generally, I would be up by 6 a.m. when the heat was no longer bearable. I hate waking up early. I am a night-bird. My most productive hours are at night. I do a million things after other people have switched off all their chips. Those days I generally woke up with a shock after the newspaper hit my head: the newspaper man never missed his target. He didn't miss that morning either. I woke up and picked up the paper. Sleepily I wondered whether I should open it and see where I figured in the list, then tucked it under the pillow and went back to sleep—it was a holiday and the neighbours wouldn't be using the lawn that early. It was not because of my qualities of patience that I tucked the paper under the pillow but, perhaps, arrogance. The same arrogance which prevented me from going to the UPSC office the previous night. I call it confidence, some would call it arrogance; to each his own. I was confident that my name would be there, somewhere in the first paragraph of the results, which usually has the toppers. Why was I so confident? After all, I was at my militant best at the interview.

It was the time of the Janata rule. Mbrarji Desai was Prime Minister, and there was a single prescription for individual and national ailments—auto-urine therapy. (God rest his soul for a thousand years—the nation got a seven-day weekend when he passed away!) In the interview I lashed out against prohibition. I said nobody had the right to impose such moral values on the nation. I was not drinking then. But I did not feel it was right for the government to dictate whether people should drink such curious potions or be in the company of better spirits. The interview board was pretty furious at a chap aspiring to be a government servant being critical of a policy so crucial to the soul of the nation—prohibition, that is. I was adamant. Finally the entire interview board shook their heads and looked at each other in disbelief.

Among the Chosen

Next came the foreign policy of India. With fairly logical reasoning, I thought I had convinced the board that India's foreign policy was a mess under the Janata government. Again there was a look of disbelief on their faces and the mandatory shaking of heads to convey their strong disapproval. I had elicited this disapproval from the moment I had entered the room. I was dressed in a black suit all right, but I had shoulder-length hair and looked more like a dissolute rock star than a candidate for the IAS. They had started off by pulling my leg. They asked me whether Alphans was a variety of mango. I said, 'Yes, it's the best of its kind, so am I.' They laughed, but reluctantly: I had sounded too arrogant. I knew that it would not be smooth sailing. They asked whether I liked fruits. I said that I loved fruits.

They asked me to name some fruits popular in Kerala. More for a quick answer than anything else, I said: 'Jackfruit and pineapple.' I saw one of the interviewer's eyes light up. He saw the opportunity for a kill.

'Can you tell me the names of some varieties of pineapples?' I knew I was trapped. I did some quick thinking. 'Keralites like pineapples, but as I have been away from Kerala for quite some time, I don't like pineapples and therefore I don't know their names,' I said. The interviewer would not give up. He insisted that I should know the varieties as I was from Kerala. I reiterated that I did not know any names. He persisted. He wanted the names of at least two varieties. I said, 'Fine, there are mainly two varieties of pineapples: the big ones and the small ones!' After all, there were always the big ones and the small ones in every species, and I couldn't be wrong. There was a sigh of relief on both sides.

At the end of forty-five minutes, I thought I had done brilliantly. The government of India wanted independent, thinking men in the civil services, not mouthpieces of the establishment. People who would take the country into the 21st century.

When I tucked the newspaper under the pillow then, it was with

Making a Difference

the confidence that I had done a superb interview, preceded by an equally good written exam. I decided that I would wake up at 10 o'clock. I woke up perspiring from the heat. I was excited too. I opened the paper. No, I was not the topper—his picture led the text. I was not second, third or fourth either. My confidence wavered for a moment. My eye paused at some familiar initials. K. J. Alphons. I was there all right, at number 8, in the first paragraph as I had promised myself. Quite a long way from a non-electrified village in Kerala, from where I matriculated with an incredible percentage of marks—hold your breath—42 percent. When I scored 42 percent, I thought I was finished. Today I knew differently. Nobody would tell me anymore that I was a dumb child. After all, the IAS is God's own service. Thus began a controversial career in the year of our Lord 1979.

MAY GOD SAVE THE COUNTRY.

2. At the Academy (1979-81)

It was a long, hot drive to Mussoorie. It was July and the rains, though due, were yet to begin. But the excitement took the edge off the heat. I was going to the most sought after institution in the country, the National Academy of Administration. My feelings were mixed as I crossed the gates. There was a lot of suspicion, even fear in my mind. I was going to be trained to govern the country for the next thirty-five years. What would the training and the service convert me into? Would I remain myself or would I just melt into the system? Would I in some way help alter the destiny of this nation where almost 40 percent of the people starved?

I reported at the Savoy Hotel where part of the batch was being lodged. The entire hotel had been taken over and made a part of the Academy. I went up the steps towards the reception. I was in my jeans and T-shirt. I still had my shoulder-length hair. As I approached the reception I saw what I had dreaded—I had landed up right in the middle of gentlemen probationers, all dressed in spotless grey flannels, ties, and jackets with name cards on their lapels. There was complete silence. All eyes were on me. They were probably shocked at the presence of this curious specimen at this august institution for the elite. I did not know whether to smile or look up into the skies. The situation was saved when a couple of my friends from Jawaharlal

Making a Difference

Nehru University walked up and introduced me to the disbelieving others. They were all serious about being at least well dressed; I was not.

I checked into the room allotted to me. It was more like an apartment with three rooms. I had two other colleagues in my apartment: Dilip Heble from the Indian Police Service and Ramachandran from the Railway Accounts Service. Pleasantries over, I decided that I had to be very much a part of the Academy, at least as far as external appearances were concerned. I jogged down to the Library Point to have a haircut.

'Academy?' the barber queried.

'Yes,' I said.

'Can't be a probationer?'

'Yes,' I said.

In disbelief he went for the largest, sharpest scissors in his armoury. I was pinned down to the chair for the next half an hour while he went about his job as ruthlessly as a butcher. He had decided he had a duty to the nation. This was his opportunity to clean up the steel frame. Job done, he sank into a chair. 'Now you look like a probationer. You can go.' He refused payment. He thought he had done something patriotic. I did not want to disappoint him. I did not pay. He became my friend.

I would drop in at the barber shop any time I passed through the Library Point. After all he was the one who had made me an 'officer'. There was a moment of sadness at the loss of my locks but I soon got over it. I picked up a couple of trousers and neckties from the shop next door, got back to my apartment, had a quick bath and got into grey trousers, white shirt and necktie. Finally I had made it. I was determined to be accepted. But I was determined too that inside I would remain the same. I would try as hard as I could to preserve myself from being stamped by the system.

It was soon dinner time and I went around meeting everybody. The disbelief was repeated this time because people could not believe

At the Academy

the transition from caveman to respectable bureaucrat in two hours. I was accepted into the gang.

I would do my mischief from the inside.

But there would always be a lingering suspicion about me among my batchmates. For my part I too felt like an outsider looking in. It helped me retain my perspective.

Within a week I was a master performer, bringing people together, organising debates, musicals and quizzes. I had lots of friends. I was everywhere. Almost every cultural programme was organised by me. I always lightened up the lectures. I had plenty of doubts. I also had plenty of ideas, most of them vague. No, I was not vague, I was straight. Though a student of economics I had topped in higher history, higher sociology and philosophy in the written exams. I had crazy ideas. I wrote most of the seminar papers and reports of group discussions. I also propounded a new philosophy which I labelled 'definitionism'.

It was a take off on existentialism. I proved that there was nothing called man. No, I did not prove that man was maya, an illusion; he was real. I proved that what existed was a world of definitions. There was no species called man. Therefore, all principles and laws laid down to govern the thoughts and actions of man were invalid. Everybody was totally floored by the logic of definitionism and a lot of people were convinced.

We were a hundred and twenty in our batch. I became the chief spokesman for my batch; in times of trouble everybody came to me and I stuck my neck out. I would get into trouble almost every day with the administration on somebody or other's behalf. Anybody who got a memo from the director came to me and I would take it up with the administration. I also received a few memos in the bargain.

I had fifteen people in my gang. Every day we would go out at seven in the evening and land up at Tavern, a pleasant little place at Kulri. The Tavern did not have a dance floor. We created one. We would dance non-stop for seven hours. A good bit of our time in

Making a Difference

Mussoorie was spent dancing. We not only danced, we also discussed philosophy, history and administration. We had a lively group, and were a little different from the run of the mill bureaucrats. Everybody was good in everything, from debates to music to dance. We were sensitive. They were my kind of people. We danced and we laughed; we also talked about the country. I partnered Aditi to win the Mussoorie open dance contest. Zeini sang better than the Carpenters. Azeez believed that he was a better economist than Ricardo. While we danced, laughed and talked, the rest of the batch slept, knowing fully well that they would all become secretaries to the government some day. Some of them were also sure that they wanted to be the cabinet secretary. Kush Verma in fact knew on which date in the year of our Lord 2013 he would be appointed cabinet secretary. But Rajiv Takroo believed that he stood a better chance. None of us had the vaguest idea of what a cabinet secretary did. I thought that he had something to do with the cabinet—maybe and maybe not. I would never be the cabinet secretary and so did not spend time worrying about what the job was, or how I would reach there.

I loved Mussoorie; I loved my batch. I was one of the few who moved around among all the probationers. There was a clear division between the urban and rural in Mussoorie. The division took place in the first week of training itself. The urban group knew how to use a fork and knife, and the correct way to knot a tie; they talked about the Beatles and Fleetwood Mac and the end of history. They knew the latest slang and some smoked grass past midnight. They despised the rural crowd, who ate with their elbows and could not distinguish between satire and Sartre.

I had landed up in Mussoorie two weeks into the course. By then the urban-rural divide had already taken place. I was wooed by both the lobbies. I had the rural flavour and the urban upbringing. I could talk about coconuts and Immanuel Kant in the same breath. The urban crowd had nightmares about the rural crowd. They wondered how such country hillbillies could decide the destiny of the nation. The

At the Academy

rural crowd felt strongly about their rural roots. India, for them, lived in the villages and it was for them to make a difference in their countrymen's lives. I was the main conduit of communication between the two groups. I was invited to all the parties. I was the darling of the batch. I was always the darling of the women, because I was considered to be the safest guy around. I was *very* safe.

I hated the group exercises at 5.30 in the morning. But my best friend Sanjay Das Gupta and I would go jogging. Sanjay also went riding, at which he excelled. Randy was his competitor. Both slept in the stables and spent most of their time trying to bribe the horses. Randy did a better job. The best horse fell for him. He won the championship. I fell from my horse on the first day I went riding and almost got killed. I never went back. I did not want to be trampled under anybody's feet, even that of a four-legged lovely's. While Sanjay went riding I spent my time at Hari's buying books. By the end of the year my room was full of books. Hari's was the meeting place for all the probationers, both urban and rural. Hari and his wife fed us with delicious parathas. Hari has now settled in Delhi after spending thirty years being a friend and guide to IAS officers in Mussoorie.

My gang trekked from Mussoorie to Dehra Dun to protest against the mining of the hills. Mussoorie was being destroyed by contractors open mining the area for lime. The entire forest cover was destroyed. It was as if a thousand volcanic eruptions had occurred there over a million years. It was desolate. It was sad. We trekked to Dehra Dun and sat in protest in front of the district magistrate's office demanding the stoppage of quarrying in the area. Mining was suspended temporarily. When we left Mussoorie, I am told, they resumed the quarrying.

Mussoorie was great fun. It was more of an extension of the university. At the end of a year's training we were sent off for district training for a year. I was posted to Palghat in Kerala. For the next year I mostly lived in the villages. I hardly spent any time in the

Making a Difference

district headquarters. When I went there the collector would insist that I have dinner with him. He generally served dinner at 3 o'clock in the morning; till then it was serious discussion on economic development and the government. Prithvi Singh, the district collector, was a remarkable man. He hardly slept. I don't know when Geeta, his wife, slept. She never complained when she served dinner at 3 a.m. She was always there. He loved talking. He would be at his office sharp at 10 a.m. even if he had gone to bed at 4 in the morning. There was never a file on his table. He was very quick, and very positive. I picked up a lot of things from him. He possessed the spirit of freedom and enterprise. I stayed with Harjinder Singh, the sub-collector, on these visits. Though a Sikh, he spoke better Malayalam than me. He was great fun.

After one year's training in the district, we were back in the Academy for the second phase of the training, which was for three months. Mussoorie was not the same this time. A lot of people had got married, a lot of others had begun to talk like politicians. Some thought that they carried the burden of the world on their shoulders. Very few remained the same. My gang broke. Sanjay and I were the only ones who breathed the same air of freshness. We had a new addition. She was Sanjay's fiancée, Shangon. She fed us for the next three months. Sanjay and I were broke all the time. She was with us at the Tavern every day. We seemed to be the only ones who were laughing. The others had become seasoned bureaucrats, out to serve the nation. We had decided that we would cross that bridge when we got there.

The second phase of training was over quickly. We were ready to fan out into the country, from Manipur to Kerala, to decide the destiny of 700 million people—the population then—for the next few decades. Some of us would meet occasionally, but the batch would never get together again. I felt very sad at the parting party. I had greatly enjoyed Mussoorie. I had greatly enjoyed the friendship of the hundred and twenty in my batch.

At the Academy

Mussoorie was expected to transform brash young creatures into sombre officers. I did not change much. I had entered the Academy two years earlier determined to remain as I was. I did not get trained to be swamped. I reinforced myself. I learnt theories of administration, but I was not brainwashed. I had my views. I still have them. I was determined to evolve my own ways of administering. I was told that some people die a quick death in Mussoorie; for some people the flame is never born; for most the flame begins to peter out. I was determined to keep the flame alive. It is fifteen years since I left the Academy; the flame is still alive. It is burning with greater strength, I feel I was at Mussoorie just yesterday. I have managed to light this flame in thousands of people across the country over the past fifteen years. I have survived. Mussoorie could have trained me. The Academy failed. I was pulled down from the 8th to the 64th rank at the end of the training. Why? Because I did not fit into the mould. I have since then come across a few of the people who were instrumental in pulling me down. They confessed that it was a mistake. I did not care then, I don't care now. The Academy, I am sure, will continue to pull down anybody who does not fit the mould.

I left Mussoorie. I learned how to wear a jacket; I knew how to wear a tie before I went there, but I never did learn to wear the name card.

3. Sub-Collector, Devikolam (1981 to 1983)

I was extremely disappointed when I got my first posting order. I was being sent to Devikolam as sub-collector and subdivisinal magistrate. Devikolam is the only jungle subdivision of Kerala. At the time of my posting, it was not even linked by telephone to the district headquarters. Devikolam is part of Idukki district, the most underdeveloped district in the state. The district was originally a reserved forest. It was taken over by the Kannan Devan Company in 1877 and converted into tea gardens. Then the migration from the plains started and by 1981, when I went there, a good portion of the forest had been destroyed. Still, it had more forest cover than any other district.

I was disappointed because I was being posted to the jungles after having lived in cities for ten years. I thrived in urban situations and thought I would rot in the jungle for the next two years. My batchmates sympathised with me.

It was a long drive to Devikolam from Kottayam, my hometown. I was a bachelor and all my belongings were packed into two large suitcases. I left most of my books behind. The long, winding drive through the forests took nearly four hours. I was amazed by the beauty

Sub-Collector, Devikolam

of the region. There were long stretches of unspoilt forest. The air was clean and it became chilly as we drove on. About thirty kilometres short of Devikolam, human habitations started. Then the countryside was full of coconut trees. Another ten kilometres and there were no more coconut trees, it was tea gardens all the way from there. Five kilometres from Devikolam I stopped at Munnar, the most important town in the high ranges. It was the headquarters of Tata Tea, which controlled most of the tea gardens in Idukki district. I stopped to buy toothpaste and a toothbrush. Another ten minutes and I was in my official bungalow. It was a beautiful house, right in the middle of the forest. There were tall eucalyptus trees all around. I walked around it. It was very lonely. Encircling it was an elephant trench. I learnt that the trench was dug after Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, the then sub-collector, got a fright when an elephant grabbed hold of his neck through the window while he was shaving. He escaped unscathed and went on to become one of the most famous contemporary writers in Malayalam literature. His book *Yantram* is the best book on Indian bureaucracy in any language so far. I wished though that they had not dug the elephant trench. Maybe I could have become a famous author! The trench was quite deep and wide, and watching the elephants across it, I felt very safe. It was a lovely site to see elephants, very often just across the pit, for the next two years. I would sit outside the bungalow in the early morning sun with my bed coffee and watch them playing around. I threw balls of jaggery to them. The elephants relished it. They would come back often. I did not disappoint them. By the end of two years I had named most of these friends of mine. It was fine as long as they were on the other side of the trench. With them, as with politicians, I always kept a distance. When elephants crossed the limits I moved away; when politicians tried to cross the limits I stood my ground, they moved on.

I took over as sub-collector on 1 September 1981. The sub-collector's office was a fairly small office in the middle of tea

Making a Difference

gardens, next to the governor's summer retreat. Next to it there were a few more offices and some quarters. It was a small place, too small even to be called a one-horse town. There was not even a provision shop at Devikolam. There was only one teashop, that too in a thatched-roof shed. The nearest place where one could buy necessities like soap or toothpaste was Munnar. Devikolam, which means the 'lake of the goddess', is 6,000 ft. above sea level. It rained all the time and it was cold too. The first thing I did was to drive down to Munnar and buy a jacket. I got a rainproof jacket at a fairly reasonable price at Martin's shop. Martin soon became my close friend and a guide to the high ranges. He still remains a good friend and still drives down to any place in Kerala where I make a speech.

Since Devikolam was a lonely place, I hated to stay home after office hours. I decided that I would take a good look at my subdivision. I started off in my jeep and in four hours reached the nearest township, the Periyar wildlife sanctuary at Thekkadi, on the Tamil Nadu border. I halted there for the day in the small rest house, which was right next to tiger trail. On the next day I proceeded to Mundakkayam on the border with Kottayam district and halted at Kattappana which was almost in the middle of my subdivision. On the third day I returned to my headquarters. I spent a day there to complete my file and magisterial work, and the next morning I was off again. This became a pattern and over the next two years, I must have travelled 100,000 kilometres on the same track. Every month I camped outside my headquarters for at least fifteen to eighteen days.

I loved travelling and I loved meeting people. I visited almost every village office in my subdivision at least once in two months. By the end of six months I knew all the revenue defaulters in the district! I got to know most people by name by the end of the first year. My subdivision was bigger than any district in Kerala. Travel was difficult because the roads were in very bad shape. Very often there were no roads at all. These were mountain roads, and as I did not trust my driver too much on them, I drove myself most of the

Sub-Collector, Devikolam

time. I became an expert in driving on mountain roads. I needed to be—I saw dozens of accidents on these roads over the next two years. I was lucky. Every two weeks I would be carrying out rescue operations when buses packed with people plunged into the gorges, leaving many dead and injured. Very often the calls came during the night when my driver was not available. I would start off on my own with quite a bit of money in my briefcase for distribution to the injured and for burial of the dead. Money was always available from the chief minister's relief fund for such purposes. I always asked my deputy to draw and keep sufficient money in our kitty so that I could go on these emergency calls in the middle of the night. I did not want to tell people in such desperate situations that financial assistance would come later. I would arrange for the burial of the dead and transportation of the injured to the medical college at Kottayam. I became a regular visitor to the Medical College, which was in my hometown. Whenever accidents took place, even before I reached the spot, the residents of the area would have already begun rescue operations. Anybody who passed through the accident spot would lend his vehicle to take the injured to the hospital. I found people tremendously conscious about their responsibilities on such occasions. Nobody tried to run away; they even spent money to hire vehicles and to make the burial arrangements themselves.

My visits to the village offices were advertised in advance so that people could come and see me. I had made it clear on my very first trip to these offices that I was posted there to sort out people's problems and not to pamper the egos of bureaucrats. I told them that I would like my officers to be respected by the public for the work they did and for their ability to sort out people's problems; they were not posted there to create problems for people.

Village offices and police stations are the two most powerful institutions in the country to which everybody has to come whether they like it or not, from birth to death. The cycle starts with the registration of a baby at birth. It ends with the registration at death.

Making a Difference

In between a person is bound to be tormented thousands of times by these two offices which are supposedly meant to make life easier for the villagers. But these are the two offices of exploitation which have maintained a stranglehold on the lives of millions of people all over the country for decades. The right to life and property are to be guaranteed by these two offices. Very often it is they that take away these rights: the police station your right to life and the village office the right to property. The village officer is the authority to determine and accept the right to property of any person in the country. He is the guardian of all records. He is the repository of all wisdom. Since he is the repository of all wisdom, most often senior officers like the tehsildar, the sub-collector or the collector can do very little if the village officer decides otherwise. After all no senior officer will issue directions to do something against official records. The village officer is not only the custodian of records but also the one who writes and updates them. I made it very clear to the village officers and to my tehsildars that I would not accept lawlessness in administration, and my interaction with people ensured that my subordinate officers were not able to function in a lawless manner. I learnt quite a bit on my field visits. After some time I knew individuals by name and I knew their problems. This ensured that my officials did not take me for a ride. I knew as much about revenue matters and the subdivision as my village officers. Thousands of land problems were sorted out on these visits. I kept a record of all the pending issues in every village office in a notebook. I kept an inspection note regarding each village office which was in a running note form right from my first visit. I had a record of whatever transpired and whatever issues were pending. On my next visit I would review these issues and call the villagers whose applications were pending. It did not usually take long to sort out their problems, specially once my subordinates knew that I meant business.

Even though I was a hard taskmaster I was not unpopular with my subordinates. I gave them the power to decide and I expected

Sub-Collector, Devikolam

them to deliver the goods. The yardstick for judging performance, of course, was people's satisfaction. If they were happy the village officer was doing his job. If a person was doing his job, he was bound to be popular. I wanted my officers to be well accepted by the public. They all became popular and they liked this feeling. They liked me too for the way I got them to do things.

Most of these officers were looking for directions from the senior officer; if we gave them a system under which things could be done they would be very happy. I gave them a simple system to operate, and that produced results. I did not believe that a government official should be unpopular with people. He would be unpopular if he did not do what people expected him to do. Some people, who call themselves principled and tough administrators, often say that they are not looking for popularity. They forget the basic fact that if they are doing a good job, people will respond warmly; such warmth is called popularity.

I do not think that I did anything revolutionary as sub-collector. I worked with the simple objective of getting down to sorting out people's problems. This produced fairly revolutionary results. I went to meet the district collector only once in two months. I hardly ever referred any matter to him for solution. I was very fortunate in not having a telephone connection either to the district headquarters or to the state headquarters. I was left alone to administer my subdivision for the next two years. I loved it.

I also added a little fun to the life of the tea garden workers. I organised an annual cultural fair at Munnar in which all the workers participated. It was a week-long fair with just about everything in it—music, sports, plays and debates. I had some very good organisers. Some of them were senior executives of Tata Tea, and some were professionals and businessmen from Munnar. The annual flower show, which was the biggest flower show in Kerala, was made a part of the Munnar fair. Most of the items in the programme were targeted towards the simple tea garden workers, who otherwise had

Making a Difference

very little entertainment.

In 1982 the first car rally in Kerala was organised by me as part of the fair; it was called the High Range 500 Rally. The rally was on high altitude roads, over a distance of 500 kilometres, starting from Munnar and proceeding through the winding roads of Thekkadi, Mundakkayam and Kothamangalam. The last trial run was done by me. I did the route thirteen minutes faster than the eventual winner. Even now I love speed. Unfortunately our roads are so bad I cannot indulge this taste often enough. But any time I get an opportunity and see a clear stretch of road, I just take off. My wife is dead scared of travelling with me. My children are most thrilled. They have promised to buy me a sports car when they begin earning so that I can take off.

I was also the sub-divisional magistrate of the area, in charge of law and order. There are very powerful provisions of the law which can be used by the SDM to ensure the safety and security of citizens. I used these pretty liberally.

On one occasion I had to take on the Public Works Department of the state. It proved to be one of my tougher challenges! A five-kilometre stretch of road from Devikolam to Munnar needed repairs very badly. I requested the assistant engineer to get the road repaired. He got down to gathering the repair material on both sides of the road. Mounds of stone were piled over the entire stretch but no repair took place for the next six months. This high altitude road was very narrow and quite a few vehicles rammed into the mounds and a few people were injured. I asked the assistant engineer to complete the repairs immediately but he did not do so. He told me that there was no provision in the budget. I issued a magisterial order under section 133 of the Criminal Procedure Code directing him to clear the road as the dumped material was endangering people using the road. He refused to remove it. I issued directions to the tehsildar to hire trucks and remove the rubble. He had to hire dozens of trucks for the job but he did it over the next three days. I issued orders for

the recovery of the cost of hiring the trucks from the salary of the engineer. The engineer filed a writ petition in the high court against my order. The high court dismissed the petition and allowed the cost to be recovered from his salary. I later ordered that the work of road maintenance be completed by a stipulated date with the necessary material to be lifted each day from the dumping area where I had had it unloaded. He had to do it.

I received tremendous public support for what I did. This was the first time in the history of Kerala that the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code were being used against a state department. I decided that I would use the law for the benefit of the people even if it had to be used against erring government departments. It was effective. When I later met the public works minister, of whom the engineer was a close relative, he did not even complain. He was silent about the entire episode. Justice Krishna Iyer in his classic judgement in the Ratlam Municipality case has held that it is the responsibility of the concerned authorities to keep the roads and civic amenities in good condition, irrespective of the availability of funds. I had not heard about Justice Krishna Iyer's judgement when I issued the order. I read it later. It is a judgement which is a benchmark for most of the executive magistrates today.

Under the same section, I ordered Tata Tea to stop discharging the effluents from the instant tea factory into the Nallathanni river. The high court stayed my order on the ground that action under the Cr.P.C. could not be taken as there was a specific Act—the Pollution Control Act. Another action which I took was to order a stop to cattle being walked from Tamil Nadu to Kerala. Since Kerala does not breed enough cows it depends for beef on Tamil Nadu. Most of the discarded farm cattle were assembled at Thekkadi and walked from there to Kottayam, a distance of 110 kilometres. Hundreds of cattle were haltered together and made to do the journey without food or water. Many of them would collapse and die on the way. Those which died were sold to the nearest butcher for whatever price obtainable.

Making a Difference

The rest were sold to butchers in Kottayam. It was cruel in the extreme/This had been going on for many years. I ordered under section 131 of the Cr.P.C. that cattle must be transported only by truck and not made to walk. The official rationale for issuing the order had to be that walking the cattle was a public nuisance which endangered the life of people using the road. I could issue the order only if there was a danger to human life or property. I could not issue the order on the ground that making them walk was painful to the animals. My order was implemented as long as I was there even though there was a public outcry at Kottayam as beef became expensive. After I left the subdivision the order was forgotten. An outcry has been started again recently by the residents of Thekkadi who have objected to the practice. It has reached the dimensions of an inter-state problem. There has been no solution yet. In terms of priority, cattle are the last thing the administration would want to be bothered with. There are millions of human beings to be taken care of. There always will be.

My subdivision had the distinction of being the biggest producer of ganja in the whole country, producing about eighty percent of it. It also produced about eighty percent of the best cardamom in the country. In the remote hill areas which one had to walk for hours to reach, most of the area was diverted to ganja cultivation. This was done under the protection of the local toughs. Ganja cultivation was a very profitable business. I led a few expeditions of police and excise officials to destroy the crop. We set fire to hundreds of acres of the plants when they were ready for harvest. We got a huge kick out of it: this* was the best grass in the world! A couple of times we were fired upon but none of us were hurt. We managed to grab a couple of *goondas* during one of our operations. We did not manage to eliminate ganja cultivation, we only managed to reduce it to a certain extent.

I had an open confrontation with Tamil Nadu, which was my bordering state, in 1982. Seven kilometres from Thekkadi, up in the;

hills, there was a shrine called Mangia Devi Temple. The Tamil Nadu government claimed that this temple was dedicated to a Tamil goddess and therefore belonged to them. I did a detailed investigation with the assistance of the Archaeological Survey of India and I came to the conclusion that there was no doubt that the temple belonged to Kerala. The legendary MGR was chief minister of Tamil Nadu, and he threatened to come and take over the temple personally. The Tamil Nadu government built an emergency helipad on its side for him to land. I promised that I would arrest him in case he came to take over the temple. I kept a very large contingent of police in readiness. When they realised that we were serious about arresting MGR, the Tamil Nadu government backed out. But the Tamils on the other side were furious. They put a prize of Rs 50,000 on my head. However, nobody ever attempted to chop off my head. I went more often to Thekkadi and visited the Mangia Devi Temple more often. Our possession over the temple was established. We drew a lot of satisfaction at having saved some Kerala territory from the neighbouring state! The people of Kerala backed me. We won.

I got married while I was at Devikolam. My wife became my interpreter for Tamil. She picked up the language in three months; I never did. I am terrible at picking up languages. My first son was born there. My marriage did not stop me from night halts outside. These continued with almost the same frequency over the next two years. Even though I was out for half the month, my family hardly missed me because I had great friends at Devikolam and Munnar and they were never without company. Akash, my elder son, was a favourite with my friends and he loved the attention. They continued to be our great friends even after we moved from there and would drive long distances to see us wherever we were. I have always kept in touch with friends made in various places. They have been my great support. Yet, almost none of them have come to me for any kind of favour.

At the end of my tenure in Devikolam I was deeply in love with

Making a Difference

the place. I knew almost everybody by name. I knew almost every tree and every boulder on the roadside in the entire subdivision. Most of all, I had greatly enjoyed my freedom as an administrator. I knew now why LAS officers were kings. I truly felt like one. I did not have to hang anybody, but I could do good for others. I could help decide their destiny. I did it with the support of the people. Till today it is the best part of my career. Those were the happiest days. Those were also the happiest days for my family. We all enjoyed our stay there. Every time I have a few days to spare, I drive up to Munnar to revive those memories.

4. Milk Man to the State (1985 – 1988)

The order appointing me managing director and chief executive officer of the Kerala Milk Federation, popularly known as MILMA, came as a bolt from the blue. MILMA was the biggest state-run organisation in Kerala. Thousands of farmers depended on it for marketing their milk and millions of consumers were totally dependent on it for their milk supply. I was only into the fourth year of my career in the IAS when I got the appointment. All the other managing directors of milk federations in other states were at least fifteen years senior to me in service. So I was the baby among them. Kerala is known to be the breeding ground of militant trade unionism. It had the first elected Communist government anywhere in the world, in 1957. The leftists have been coming back to power ever since, their tenures alternating with those of the Congress. On my second day in the post, while analysing the performance of MILMA units scattered all over the state, to my consternation I found that there had been strikes in every unit at least twice a month consistently for the past three years. Milk is highly perishable, and a strike even for a couple of hours meant that the milk spoiled. Thus the dairies were throwing out spoiled milk at least once every two

Making a Difference

weeks. If the milk was spoilt the consumers were left empty-handed because in most cases there was no alternative source available. I decided that the most important priority for me would be to ensure that there were no strikes in any of my units. I had a total of thirty-six units, scattered all over the state, most of them being milk processing dairies and milk chilling plants; I also had two cattle feed manufacturing plants and one tetrapack plant.

I called a meeting of all the trade unions within a week. There were twenty-four registered trade unions in the organisation. Each was represented by its president and secretary. Thus there were forty-eight participants in the meeting. There were two former chief ministers, six ex-ministers and any number of members of Parliament and members of the State Legislative Assembly who were presidents of these unions. I was amazed to see this very distinguished assortment of super VIPs who were heading the trade unions. I told them how thrilled I was to have such responsible public men heading trade unions in a very vital sector which was of crucial importance to farmers and consumers. I also briefed them about the extent of losses MILMA was incurring during the past few years mainly due to strikes in the units. I told them that the only way of survival for the organisation was to ensure that the milk did not spoil, which in turn meant that strikes had to be avoided. I asked them what was the main cause of strikes in the units. The unanimous opinion was that that strikes took place because of the lack of response to the employees' grievances by the management. Most of these grievances pertained to simple issues concerning individual employees. As the management failed to sort these out, the trade unions had to take up these issues, which eventually led to strikes. This being so, I thought the solution would be to make the management responsive to their grievances and redress them quickly. I gave them the assurance, which I was not very sure I would be able to keep, that any individual representation from any employee would be replied to within three days of its receipt. The promise was not merely to put up the file

within three days, but to give a reply by the third day. All the unit managers who were present at the meeting were directed to ensure that this assurance was complied with. I did not know whether we could abide by the promise. But we did.

For the next three years, we kept our word; any representation that was received in any of my thirty-six units was replied to before the third day. All unit managers had to send me a copy of the representation along with the replies furnished. I also gave my unit managers a free hand to take decisions on individual employees' representations. They were asked to interpret the rules and take a decision at their own level instead of referring such matters to headquarters. The message to them was to be very positive in dealing with the grievances. I asked them to interpret the rules for the benefit of the employees, within the spirit of the orders issued by headquarters. Thus the unit managers felt a tremendous sense of power coupled with that of responsibility to ensure that correct decisions were taken. There were no strikes in any of my thirty-six units for the next thirty-six months. I also told the trade union leaders that any representation regarding collective demands of the employees would be attended to immediately and a reply would be given to the union within a week of receiving the representation. We kept our word.

Personally I feel most strikes are due to management indifference to employee grievances. Their complaints are not attended to and even when they are, the general approach is to deny what is sought. The tendency is prevalent not only in public sector undertakings, I think it is a national phenomenon. Any representation received by the government from the employees or from the public is treated as an unnecessary nuisance and the basic guideline is to ensure that the request is not granted. In most cases it appears that the function of bureaucracy is to cook up a rationale for turning down the request. Even in the most foolproof cases, it is possible to come up with ten good reasons to explain why something which is

Making a Difference

legitimately asked for cannot be granted.

Even strike notices in most cases are not attended to. Such representations are not taken seriously by the management in most of the public sector undertakings and in the government. Only when matters build up to a crisis does the management wake up. This awakening usually comes about after the strike has started. I told the trade union leaders that apart from the commitments made by me, they also had to behave responsibly. I had in mind their reputation for militancy. Quite a few chief executives have been beaten up in Kerala. Several others have suffered verbal abuse. I told the trade union leaders that if anybody abused me, for every word of abuse, I would retort with five choice ones of my own. I told them that I had picked up a dictionary of abuse which would come in very handy to me. I went one step further. I told them that if anybody raised his hand against me, I would beat him to a pulp. I told them I knew karate and would not be reluctant to use it if the need arose. Not that I knew any karate. Nor did I have to open my dictionary of abuse. I became good friends with all the union leaders. In fact I used to pull their leg as to why they could not find any issue to go on strike. They said that I had blocked that option as the employees were very happy. No milk was spoiled in any of my units during my tenure. I would laugh and joke with my employees, but never for a moment did any of them take me for granted. The government had no business to be in business, but since we were, I expected MILMA to be a better business house than any other in the state, I told my 5,000 employees.

I told my managers that they were kings in their units and that it was they who had to take decisions and run the place. They were expected to take decisions at their own level, without consulting me. Every time they called to consult me on an issue, I would put a red mark against their name on the score sheet I kept with me. At the monthly meetings of my managers I would tally how many times they had called me up during the month for consultations. The best manager was the one who had called me the least. The score sheet

was made available to all the managers so that everybody knew who was an apron-string manager and who an independent manager, capable of running his little kingdom by himself.

In most government organisations and even in the private sector, it is usual to breed dependency. The most responsible manager is considered to be the one who rings up the boss three times a day to consult him. The boss feels good, he feels that he is the repository of all wisdom; it is a good technique of flattery. The junior manager feels happy because it is also a good way of evading responsibility: if something goes wrong after he has consulted the boss, justification is available. It keeps both the boss and the unit manager happy. Everything except business gains, for by the time decisions are taken, communicated and implemented, it is too late. As the unit manager is simply following directives rather than doing something on his own initiative, there is a lack of commitment in the implementation. There are no personal stakes for the manager because he has not taken the decision. Even if he flounders, there is always somebody else to blame. And if he does do things right, it is the boss who takes the credit.

I told my managers that they were bosses; they would be given credit for the achievements of the unit and they would be taken to task for any failure. As time went on, there were fewer calls from the unit managers. Within six months, we had established a new work culture.

Every time I saw a good performance, even in a minor area, I always rang up the unit managers to tell them how good it was to have people like them who were producing results. Thus my role was to lay down general policy decisions and not meddle in the daily functioning of the units. It was the job of the boys in the field to manage the line work. Of course they got all the credit for what they did and took the blame if things did not work. I gave outstanding confidential reports to anybody who produced results. I told them that I was not interested in knowing how much time and effort they

Making a Difference

were putting in; I would evaluate them by the results they produced. I told them that they could be hanged from the ceiling if they failed. If at the end of the day a unit was functioning better than the day before, as far as I was concerned, it was perfectly all right. If they chose to sleep for the day, it was their choice; they could work through the night. But I wanted every manager to set a personal example to the employees.

Generally raw material purchase was controlled by the head office, but I delegated this power to the unit managers. It was in their interest to ensure that raw material costs in their unit were less than the costs in any other unit. These costs would be reviewed every month, so nobody could get away with paying more than what somebody else was paying. This ensured accountability.

I was just into my fifth day in office when I got a letter from the government issuing certain directions to me. I promptly called my stenographer and dictated a letter which went as follows:

Kerala Milk Federation is an autonomous Federation. Government has its nominees on the Board of Directors of the Federation. If the Government desires to express any views on any issue, the Government is welcome to do so in -the Board meeting, through the Government nominees on . the Board. No directions will be entertained from the Government except as above. In the above circumstances the letter in original is returned herewith.

The letter sent shock waves through the secretariat. No CEO had dared respond in such a manner, least of all someone as junior as I was. There were discussions in the minister's and secretary's office to decide how to tackle me. I did not bother to meet anyone to explain my viewpoint. My brief letter explained it all. The message was very clear. But I had no reason to panic because I knew I was protected by the almighty Dr Verghese Kurien, chairman of the National Dairy

Milkman to the State

Development Board. Before a person is appointed as CEO in any Milk Federation, Dr Kurien's approval has to be taken by the government as, under Operation Flood, the state milk federations are funded by the NDDB. Dr Kurien gives his clearance for the appointment only on the condition that the appointee will not be removed before three years. Dr Kurien is not a paper tiger. Everybody is scared of him because they need his money and he enjoys a tremendous international reputation. He is also extremely touchy about the autonomy of milk federations. I knew therefore that I was on the right track when I wrote the letter to the government. Of course, I marked a copy to Dr Kurien for his information. The state government considered taking up my 'impropriety' with Dr Kurien but decided against it—they knew he would religiously support the CEO of any state unit on this issue. Their hostility was over in a week and I had an excellent working relationship with the minister and the secretary thereafter. I never had any interference from the ministry during my tenure. I received no letters of direction from the ministry. If the government had any views to express, it was done through its nominees on the board. These nominees were also at liberty to write to us for placing any issue in the board's agenda. I had excellent rapport with them as well.

Public sector companies in this country are run by the ministries like domestic kitchenettes. Even though such undertakings are supposed to be autonomous bodies, appointments of staff from officers to peons are decided at the minister's level in most undertakings. Yet the government has the nerve to call these undertakings autonomous. They are basically the personal fiefdoms of the ministers and the political parties in power. Most purchases and contracts are dictated by the ministers. They get their commission on everything from chillies to computers.

In Kerala, where there is a high level of unemployment, when applications were invited for the posts of bus-conductors recently, there were over half a million applicants for the jobs, including more

Making a Difference

than a dozen applicants with Ph.Ds in Chemistry and Physics, such is the level of unemployment in the state. There is unemployment because there is no industry. There is tremendous pressure on the minister and the party in power to control recruitment to various jobs, from top to bottom.

I appointed about 800 persons in the new units which were opened during my tenure. There was never any political interference in an appointment. We did not appoint a single political nominee during my tenure. Once the minister's stenographer came for an interview for the post of data entry operator in the computer centre. This was the only time when the minister rang me up personally. I told him that the manager of the computer centre would take a decision after interviewing the person along with other applicants. A fair decision would be taken; I would not talk to the manager nor recommend that he speak to him directly. The stenographer was not selected but the minister had no grievance against me as he was informed about the marks scored by the steno.

Most public sector undertakings have been reduced to what they are today due to the total surrender of their bosses to their political masters. Of course, the government has no business to be in business. It must only be a facilitator. But once a policy decision was taken to set up public sector undertakings, it should have been apparent that they could only succeed if they were run like proper business houses by CEOs who would have the guts to run them as independent organisations. Most of the CEOs have been from the IAS. The IAS officers were expected to be a cut above the rest. Unfortunately, this brilliant breed has most often surrendered to the politicians without even a squeak. Day-to-day operations are dictated by people who hang around ministers' offices. The undertakings have become a source of funds for politicians in power.

Why is it that CEOs do not even make the effort to run their organisations properly, as I found it so easy to do? I think fundamentally it has to do with the bureaucratic culture. The

Milkman to the State

bureaucracy has surrendered its inherent powers to the politicians. Officials have become slaves to third-rate politicians who may not even be in power. I think it is a sheer lack of will. You decide to be a slave or master the day you join service. Most people decide to be slaves the moment they walk through the imposing gates of the National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie. From then onwards it is a mad scramble to occupy prized posts during the next thirty-five years. Little do they realise that every post which they occupy could be a prize post if they so decided.

Our bureaucracy is so immensely powerful. It is the most powerful anywhere in the world. Our bureaucrats also do not have to worry about getting a job. They shall always have a job because the all-India services are a product of the Constitution of India. Nobody can chuck us out of the service. Then why is it that most people decide to be slaves? I have done exactly what I wanted and yet I have got along pretty well with everybody, including politicians. However, there appears to be a mortal fear among bureaucrats that if they act independently, the politicians will not accept their style of functioning and they will be removed summarily. This fear is totally unfounded. I have been always militantly independent; so far, I have had only five postings, my average tenure being three years in any job. I have always tried to deliver the goods in all my jobs. My effort has always been to deliver them better than almost everybody else. If one has the guts to demand independence and autonomy, one should have the ability to prove to the bosses that one can do the job better than anybody else. If you are not good enough, you can expect others to tell you how to go about it. But if you do it better than your bosses could ever imagine, they will not interfere. They will leave you alone. The yardstick is your results. I always got the appreciation of my superiors because I was producing results and nobody ever accused me of being biased or of acting out of self-interest. One has to be totally above board to ensure independence. If one has skeletons in one's cupboard, there is no way one can act independently. If one

Making a Difference

has nothing to hide, there is no way the politician can take you on. He will accept the fact that such professionals are required in his ministry.

The politician is elected to govern for a certain tenure; during that tenure he has to produce results. If he does not, he may not get re-elected. Therefore, it is important for him that at least in some vital areas he has something tangible to show. For this, he needs bureaucrats who will deliver the goods. That is what the political masters looked towards me for. I was seen as a professional manager who could make their dreams come true. If one is mediocre, the political masters will accept you as such and use you differently. 'All right, he is not exactly doing much of a job on his own; therefore, he can do our job very well' will be the approach. Even an officer who is third-rate will not be thrown out of the service because he may be useful in some way, perhaps in serving a political interest.

From 1985 to 1988 I sold milk. I set up five new milk processing plants and two cattle feed manufacturing plants. I also introduced tetrapack milk in Kerala. We started selling flavoured milk and fruit juice from the ultra-modern factory. We increased our turnover by 300 percent during the three years. The number of primary milk cooperatives of the farmers shot up similarly during the same period. Most of my thirty-six units started making cash profits during the period. A very strong delivery system was built up for delivery of inputs to the farmers. Services were strengthened and emergency services were made available to anybody on call. The administration of dairy plants was handed over to the collective representatives of the farmers, called Milk Unions.

I spent most of the time either in the new project areas or in meeting farmers' cooperatives. I addressed at least one cooperative a day. These meetings were meant to promote the milk cooperative concept. The message was that people should take the initiative to ensure that this movement became truly their own and produced lasting results. In the course of the meetings I picked up a lot about

dairying myself from the farmers.

Within three months of my taking over as CEO, I had an elected chairman, Prayar Gopalakrishnan. He was the first elected chairman of the Kerala Milk Federation. Prayar was a genuine dairy farmer, though he was a politician. He was president of the district Congress Committee of Alleppey district. The day he took charge, I was highly apprehensive about how things were going to work out now that I had an elected man to lord over me. I was in fact a little hostile to him. I even refused to part with one of my two vehicles in the first three days. I ordered a new vehicle for him, but it would take two weeks for delivery. I told him that he had to wait for delivery of the new vehicle. He was very understanding. He said it was fine. In a couple of days I discovered that this man was totally different. He was most unlike the image one has of the politician in our system. On the third day I gave him one of my cars. Within a week we were close friends.

Over the next three years we built up a working relationship which went much beyond the necessary official interaction. He was like a family member after office hours. During office hours, we discussed only business. He had an eye for business and he knew what was good for the farmers. Whatever I picked up from people, I passed it on to him. Quite often I disputed his line of thinking and arguments. He was most reasonable and open to suggestions. I have not come across many politicians as honest as him. According to the Anand pattern cooperative system, the elected chairman of a federation is very powerful. He could have exercised a lot of controls but he left the entire administration to me. There was not a single instance when he tried to interfere in the functioning of the organisation. There would have been tremendous political pressure on the chairman to take in people. In many cases, the chairman headed the interview board. Of the 800 or so recruited while I was there, not a single person was hired based on political influence. In a state where for a clerical post people pay over two lakh rupees as

Making a Difference

a bribe to be selected, a lot of money could have been made on appointments alone. On an average of Rs.2 lakhs per job, he could have made sixteen crore rupees. He did not make any money nor did he interfere with the process of selection at all. My minister belonged to his party but he never passed on instructions from the minister to me. He never recommended any supplier for purchase of raw material. He never recommended a contractor for work. I was amazed that such good people could survive in politics. He has survived and I am told that he is still the chief of the Congress Party in the district. But he never got a ticket from the party for the Assembly. When I left the organisation, he wrote to Dr Kurien and the government that he had never seen an officer with such outstanding qualities in all his life. He was not trying to flatter me. He did not need to do so.

In most cases where politicians are non-executive chairmen of public sector undertakings, the story is different. The administrator surrenders the administration to the non-executive chairman. From appointment to purchase, everything has a price. Companies get plundered and they go broke. This is why most of the public sector undertakings are broke. They have been mismanaged and looted. The administrators have abdicated their basic responsibilities and let the politicians take over. I do not blame the politicians; I would only blame the bureaucrats who are supposed to be the steel frame delivering goods and services to the nation as promised in our Constitution. It is the steel frame which is supposed to keep the country together by running organisations according to the laid down principles of business administration. Unfortunately, most people do not even make the effort. They are happy to be bullied by the politician. They bully their subordinates and the country in turn. The politician makes money. Often they do it together. It is a partnership in looting. In a democracy bureaucrats have to accept the fact that politicians are unavoidable. But this does not mean that administrators should surrender their basic responsibilities; both have their roles. It is part of the administrative ability of the

bureaucrat to take the politician along. It is a talent for the bureaucrat to convince the politician that what he is doing for the organisation is right and that the politician should help him in achieving results. In my sixteen years of experience I have found it easy to take the politician along; never once did I have to compromise on my powers. Never did a politician take a decision which I was supposed to be taking. I respected them. They knew that what I was doing was best for the organisation.

I made my first pilgrimage to Anand in Gujarat within fifteen days of my taking over. Anand is the headquarters of Dr Verghese Kurien, chairman, National Dairy Development Board. He is God to millions of farmers in this country; unlike most other godmen he deserves adoration. That is why a trip to Anand was like a pilgrimage to me. Dr Kurien hates the bureaucracy. He hates IAS officers. He believes that the bureaucracy is so enmeshed in red tape that nothing can be done in this country. Since the IAS has a stranglehold on the system, he hates it.

My experience with Dr Kurien was entirely different. He was totally supportive of whatever I was doing. When I could not get decisions on my big projects from the regional offices, it would take me only minutes to convince Dr Kurien and there would be instant decisions. Projects worth crores of rupees would be cleared in minutes. He was a remarkable decision-maker. But one could expect that from him. I was dealing with a man who was at the peak of a career that had spanned over forty years. I was the baby among the CEOs, of all the milk federations, but I had the best working relationship with him. When I left the federation, in 1988, he wrote to the state government that the federation had made tremendous progress during my tenure and that he was extremely sorry that I was leaving. He still hates the IAS, but he loves all those who have worked with him and who have done a good job.

I was also the managing director of the Indo-Swiss Project during this period. This project was the largest producer of frozen

Making a Difference

cattle semen in the world, producing about eight million doses a year. It has broken new ground in breeding technology in the country. It has the best five cattle breeding farms in the country. I was highly impressed by the way these farms were run. I was able to learn enough about breeding to be able to convince scientists that there was a need to shift from the Swiss Brown to the Jersey and the Holstein Friesian. The Swiss Brown was essentially a meat animal and so its milk production was well below the level acceptable for a milch animal. My two Swiss advisers were adamant that there could be no alternative to it. They were being patriotic, as the Swiss Brown is almost a national animal in their country. Eventually I convinced them also about the need for this switch and a new breeding policy was accepted. Since 1987, the new breeds I had proposed have been given predominance.

Today they choose eighty IAS officers from among 8.5 lakh applicants. We are supposed to be exceptionally intelligent. One does not need to be brilliant to succeed in the service. One merely needs to use common sense. Combined with the will to learn, this approach can work miracles. I became as much a breeder during my tenure as most scientists in my organisation. They respected me for that. The project had some of the country's most outstanding officers in the field. The Swiss were of the opinion that the project's farms in Kerala were much better run than the organised farms in Switzerland. This was high praise, coming as it did from the Swiss themselves. I also found that our Indian scientists were much better than my two full-time Swiss advisers. When we give them a free hand to conceive and develop systems, our scientists can do a fantastic job in India itself. Unfortunately, we don't give them the opportunity, or if we do, we mess around with their work. In this project, they had unfettered opportunity, and they did a remarkably good job.

We used innovative systems in MILMA. One of the simple things I did after taking over was to ensure that the consumer had confidence in MILMA milk. There had always been complaints that

Milkman to the State

MILMA milk got spoiled very often and no replacement was given. I introduced the system of home replacement of spoiled milk in all my units. Any person whose milk had spoiled could ring up the dairy. The dairy would deliver the milk at the residence of the consumer within an hour in the dairy vehicle. No questions would be asked from the consumer as to how the milk got spoiled. In fact he would not even be asked to show the milk. When I discussed the idea of introducing this system with my financial people, they objected very strongly. They felt that if such a system were introduced, there would be large-scale requests for replacement and consumers would take MILMA for a ride. What really happened was most surprising. On any given day, there were not more than five persons in any unit requesting replacement. We lost nothing. We won the confidence of people in our product. The results were phenomenal. We increased our turnover by 300 percent in three years. Simple things work—if we let them.

5. Kottayam Incorporated

I took over as collector, Kottayam, in 1988. From the moment I took over, I decided that my district was going to be my domain and nobody else's. There would be no politicians taking arbitrary decisions. Nor for that matter would there be arbitrary decision making by me either. It would be my kingdom, but with transparency.

Kottayam is the heartland of Kerala. It is the home of spices and rubber and the citadel of the Syrian Christian community, which is the most prosperous community in Kerala. I am a Syrian Christian myself, tracing back my roots to the first century A.D., when St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Christ, landed in Kerala and converted its elite to the fold of Christ through his magic.

Both my wife and I are from Kottayam. The day before the cabinet decision was taken to post me at Kottayam, there were rumours going the rounds in the secretariat that I was being posted there. I met the chief minister, E.K. Nayanar, who belonged to the CPM, and told him that there was an unwritten rule that IAS officers should not be posted to their home districts as district collectors. This was to ensure that they were not unduly influenced by their relatives and friends living there. Mr Nayanar was highly amused. He told me, 'This is a rule made by the government of India and it is a Congress rule. I will teach them some rules in administration.' I didn't know

Kottayam Incorporated

what he had in mind but I told him that whatever it was I hoped it would not get me into trouble. He said that he would certainly keep it in mind while taking a decision at the cabinet meeting. He was serious about teaching the Central government a little bit of administration: the next day it was decided in the cabinet that I would be district collector, Kottayam. He loved to do such things.

My second day as DC started with fireworks. My predecessor had acquired a few hundred acres of land for the Mahatma Gandhi university at Kottayam. After the award was announced, the university refused to release the money for compensation to the farmers on the ground that it was required for more urgent projects of the university. There was a public outcry because the land had been notified many years earlier for acquisition and the farmers had not made any effort to develop it or derived any income from it during this period. The land had lost its value. The university now did not want the land and the farmers felt cheated. I decided to side with the farmers as I felt that the university was being unfair. There were skirmishes over the next two days between the vice-chancellor and me on the front pages of newspapers. On the third day, I decided to surprise the vice-chancellor. I landed up at his office unannounced. I did not expect a very warm welcome; instead I was greeted with a hug. In two minutes, the problem was sorted out. The farmers got their money and the university the land. Little did I realise that this handsome, greying man who had greeted me so warmly was the famous Kannada writer U.R. Anantha Murthy, who went on to become the president of the Sahitya Akademi and a Jnanpith award winner. Thus began a friendship which was to produce dramatic results over the next four years. Both of us were dreamers, but pragmatic ones: we had decided that we would realise our dreams; they would not remain exercises in futility.

The farmers were ecstatic, the press was happy that it had a collector who would provide good copy. By the third day, my name was known to most people in the district; in three-and-a-half years'

Making a Difference

time, I would know the names of many of them.

About five months later, the chief minister visited my district. He had lunch at the government guest house. His personal assistant was supposed to clear the CM's bill on his checking out from the guest house. He forgot to pay. Next day there was a call from the PA to the CM to my private secretary directing me to clear the CM's bill. I found out the amount, it was small—Rs 150. Mr Nayanar was a man of frugal habits; he smoked beedis and ate very little. He and his personal staff had spent only Rs 150 on the lunch. I asked my secretary to connect me to the PA. I told the PA that I did not draw my salary to feed the CM. He was shocked. 'I'll tell the CM in just these words what you told me,' he threatened. 'Go ahead,' I told him. He would, too, I knew. I could lose my job. I felt scared.

Two weeks later Mr Nayanar came to the guest house again and I was summoned. I went to meet him, not very comfortable because I knew that he was going to raise the issue. After small talk about the weather, he came straight to the call.

'Did you really tell my PA that you did not draw your salary to feed the CM?' he asked. He did not look very pleased.

I said, 'Yes, I said it.'

'Very good,' he responded. 'It is the personal staff of politicians who destroy their reputation. You have taught my staff a good lesson; keep it up.'

I could not believe it, I had got away with it! I continued as collector of Kottayam for the next three-and-a-half years. I was one of the₄ favourites of Mr Nayanar and the state cabinet. I issued instructions to my officers that none of them would pay for the entertainment of ministers or politicians, even if they were ministers of their own departments. They were expected to call on ministers when they visited the district and be courteous to them. They were not, however, expected to fetch water, clean toilets and clear the bills. Most ministers do not pay their bills when they tour the districts. It is **the** collectors who direct their subordinates to make elaborate

Kottayam Incorporated

arrangements to entertain not only the ministers and their personal staff but the hangers on and hoodlums who hover around whenever the ministers are visiting. The collectors generally pass on the responsibility of entertainment to the tehsildars, supply officers, executive engineers and police inspectors. If they have spent five thousand rupees on entertainment, they will collect fifty thousand from the local businessmen for the purpose. This is how corruption starts and is bred. The entertainment does not always start and end with ministers. The local officials very often entertain taluk and block level functionaries of various political parties who have clout with their political masters. Many deals are struck by the officials at these sessions. No honest government official can check into a government guest house or dak bungalow after sunset because these are often the scene of shady activity, with most of the rooms occupied by local power brokers and the officials entertaining them.

I raided the rest house at Kottayam twice and arrested all those who were found to be drunk, including the manager and the staff who were serving liquor. After these raids, the rooms used to be vacant in the evenings. The Kottayam resthouse became a very unattractive place for politicians after that.

The Right to Life

A couple of months into my new job, two youngsters walked into my house early one morning with a representation. A child in the village was dying and the parents were not willing to have the child treated as they belonged to a Christian sect which prohibited medical treatment. God, they believed, would cure them through prayer. These youngsters showed me a doctor's prescription recommending immediate blood transfusion. They had tried to persuade the parents to permit them to take the child to the medical college for treatment at their own expense. The parents were unrelenting in spite of the pressure they had exerted through local

Making a Difference

leaders. I was their last resort.

I called for my stenographer and dictated a three-line letter to the police inspector in charge of that area. The letter went like this: 'Kindly find enclosed a representation. This child has the right to live irrespective of the religious belief of his parents. Take the child into custody and treat him at the medical college.' The inspector promptly took the child into custody and sent him to the hospital at Kottayam, where a blood transfusion was given to him. The child recovered in three days and within a week he was discharged. He did not die. He is still alive.

A month later a battery of lawyers walked into my office with a bundle of papers. They were all senior advocates from the high court, one of them was a famous advocate from Bombay. The bundle of papers which was thrust upon me was a copy of a writ petition which the parents of the child had filed against me in the high court of Kerala. The writ petition ran into more than a thousand pages. I went through it; it stated the history of litigation in various countries on the same issue, especially in the United States, where there were dozens of cases in which this sect had challenged the jurisdiction of the state for forcing their sect members to be medically treated even when they were dying. I am told that some cases have been decided in their favour, others are still pending.

I asked the advocates whether it was not their responsibility as constitutional pundits to uphold the right to life over everything else. If so, was it not their responsibility to support my action? The writ petition challenged the authority of the district collector to issue the order authorising the police to take the child into custody. Under what provision of law did I issue it, I was asked. I told them that since the right to life was fundamental, I, as district magistrate, had the responsibility to issue appropriate orders so that a life could be saved. I told them that even if I was not legally empowered, if I had not issued such an order, the child would have died.

The lawyers felt that the youngsters who had approached me

Kottayam Incorporated

could have filed a public interest writ petition in the high court and left it to the court to decide. I did not see how I could have allowed that. Precious time would have been lost in filing the petition: the youngsters had come to me on a Saturday which was a court holiday. The earliest they could have approached the court would have been Monday and it would have taken at least a couple of days more for the court to issue any orders. The child would not have survived untreated for that long.

The only other option I had had was to tell these youngsters that I was powerless and send them away disappointed. As a bureaucrat, I was expected to go by the law. It was what most bureaucrats would have done. Was I right in acting differently? Perhaps not, legally. No legislation empowered the district magistrate to do what I did. But I do believe that I had the moral, if not the legal right to issue the order. The advocates understood the logic of my action, but they argued that logic was not law and I had exceeded my authority. 'Aren't the parents of the child happy with what I did?' I asked them. 'Their happiness is not relevant,' they answered. It was the law and its enforcement which they were trying to uphold.

The advocate-general directed me to file my counter to the writ petition. I sent him a copy of my letter to the inspector with a covering letter which read as follows:

'My reply to the thousand-odd page writ petition is what I have already categorically written in my letter to the inspector of police. I am aware that it is a very scanty letter. But my three-line letter contains the logic and constitutionality of my orders. You may, therefore, file my counter affidavit on the above lines in the high court.'

The advocate-general was very unhappy with my reply. I don't blame him—one is expected to refute every argument in the petition. Here was this writ petition over 1,000 pages long, quoting law from every country and precedents from almost every part of the world, and here I was giving a three-line reply. This, he felt, was an insult

Making a Difference

to the legal profession. He wanted me to file a detailed reply. I rang him up and courteously told him that I had nothing more to add. I asked him whether he agreed with my logic; he said that the argument was sound but it had to be elaborated upon. I told him that it was his job to do so if he felt that what I had said in those three lines was not elaborate enough. I told him that there was nothing more I wanted to add to them. He told me that it would be very difficult to file the counter.

I do not know whether the counter has been filed by the advocate-general so far and whether the court has disposed of the case. I have not received any arrest warrant in the case so I presume it has not been decided. Probably the advocate-general has not filed ; the counter and therefore the court has not listed the case for hearing so far. It takes years for cases of this nature to come up in our courts, even when they concern such fundamental issues. They have far too much work. As far as I am concerned, my task was accomplished when the child was saved. But it is a question which should be of wider concern.

I did what I did because I am basically a common-sense administrator. I do not know how many administrators in this country would support what I did. How would they have responded in such a situation? Would any other district magistrate be willing to interpret the law as I did? I was not only interpreting the law, I was also 'creating' law. In a country like India where most people have little access to the courts, either out of ignorance or for lack of financial resources, I believe that administrators have to take on the role of 'law makers' too. They have to interpret the law in respect of its purpose rather than in a narrowly legalistic way, even if this departs from the standard interpretation or if there are no precedents for their reading of it. In the process, they may also end up 'creating' the law as I did. A lot of administrators would say that what I did was wrong. I believe that what I did was right because I did not see myself as an administrator hobbling on the crutches of a law which could not even

Kottdyam Incorporated

protect so fundamental a right as the right to life. This is where the administrator becomes a king because he has to empower himself with the logic of common sense and humanity. The government and the system might hang you because you are crossing the limits laid down. But when an administrator is convinced about the rightness of what he has done, nobody will have the guts to hang him. In this case I do not think that the high court can ever pass an order against me because I was protecting the most basic principle in the universe. I feel pretty confident that the high court will support my action because the Kerala High Court is a very enlightened court which has come out with some remarkable judgements upholding human values, even when the book of law has laid down otherwise.

My fight with this particular Christian sect dates back to the time when I was a deputy secretary from 1983 to 1985. At the time I had received a representation from the public that children in a school run by this sect were not singing the national anthem as they believed that they owed allegiance only to God and not to any country. I promptly issued an order without even referring the file to either the secretary or the minister, although such policy files are expected to go up not only to the minister but even to the chief minister for a decision. To me, however, the issue was absolutely clear. My order went like this:

Every citizen of this country must owe allegiance to this country irrespective of his religious belief. The national anthem and the national flag are the most important and respectable symbols of this country, India. Therefore, if anybody claims to be an Indian he has to sing the national anthem and respect the national flag; therefore, the refusal of the school to sing the national anthem in the school is anti-national. Right to freedom does not envisage the right to insult the country. Therefore the school should ensure that the national anthem is sung in the school. The district.

Making a Difference

education officer should ensure that the above orders are complied with and the fact reported to the government within ten days.

The school went to the high court against my directive. A division bench of the high court upheld my directive through a very detailed and lengthy judgement. The school went in appeal to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court came out with a judgement quashing my order. The court came to the conclusion that it was not necessary to sing the national anthem. Nevertheless I strongly believe that what I did was right. I am told that this sect also refuses to sing the national anthem in the United States. I am told that some courts have upheld their contention, while some others have turned them down. I don't care what the U.S. courts have said. It does not help us

To the People

One day an eighty-year-old woman, Lakshmi, was carried to my house by a couple of neighbours. She told me that she had been going to the village office for the past two years to get her property transferred to her name. She had about 80 square yards of land where she lived. She had no relatives or anybody else in the world to help her. She said that there should be some mechanism by which such matters could be decided at the village office itself speedily. People like her should not have to travel to the district headquarters to get things done at the village office. Lakshmi set me thinking. Instead of people having to come to the collectorate, we decided to go to the people.

I called a meeting of all the district officers and put the idea across to them. They were not very optimistic about its chance of success. I said that we could give it a try and if we succeeded then we could repeat it. We didn't give the programme any name. We just

Kottayam Incorporated

decided that we would go to the people. Bureaucrats have often been accused, with justification, of refusing to move beyond their desks. The only problems that they recognise, it is said, are those seated in front of them or about whom a file has been put up. The rest are assumed not to exist.

The first programme was held exactly three months after I took over, at Vazhoor, which was one of the far-off panchayats of the district. While inaugurating the programme the local MLA, Kanam, christened it 'To the People'.

The procedure we followed was very simple. The venue and time of a meeting was announced in advance through the panchayats and the media. Generally two panchayats were clubbed together and a location central to both chosen as the meeting place; a time of teij days was generally given from the date of announcement for the people to submit petitions, which were to be filed in the panchayat offices concerned. These petitions were classified department-wise, entered into a register at the panchayat offices and forwarded to the district collector. The collectorate staff would sit through the night in batches to do the classification. I never had to assign duties to anybody for the purpose—the labour union in the collectorate took the initiative in doing so. They never asked for over-time. It was their decision to work through the night and read thousands of petitions over a two-day period. At the first programme, we received only 215 petitions. After a couple had taken place, we started receiving thousands of petitions. Finally, in one of the programmes, we received 4,500 representations. Still my staff managed to read and classify them in two days. Once the classification was done, the petitions were forwarded to the district officers with a covering letter from the collector. The officers were asked to examine these petitions over the next month and come prepared to deal with them when they came for the programme.

All the petitioners were informed individually through the mail that they would be heard in person at the meeting. The venue was

Making a Difference

always a school. It had to be a school with more than fifty rooms as there would be about that many departments represented at the programme. The petitioner was also informed the room number in which he was to be present.

On the scheduled day, all the district officers would reach the spot by 9 a.m. The Member of Parliament for that area and the members of the Legislative Assembly had to be present throughout the day. If there was any minister from those panchayats, he was also expected to attend. There was no question of any of these elected representatives doing the disappearing act. It was made clear to the MLAs as well as the panchayat members that this was their programme and therefore they had to be present and conduct the entire proceedings. All the arrangements were expected to be made by the panchayats themselves.

The inaugural function was kept short and never lasted more than ten minutes. The minister elected from the area inaugurated the programme. If there was no minister from there, the local MLA did so. The people were informed at the function that the entire government had come to the panchayats to solve their problems and they should demand justice without in any way feeling restrained. They were also informed that there would be lunch for everybody, courtesy the panchayats, and that there would be a winding-up programme in the evening where every district officer would come up on the stage and explain to the people the action taken on each petition.

Soon after this, it would be business time and all the departmental officers dispersed to the rooms allotted to them.

At the entrance of each room, the room number as well as the name of the department and the names of the officers were displayed. The petitioners would go to the rooms indicated in the communication sent to them and wait for the officers to call for them one by one. All the petitioners connected with the first petition would gather around the department officers. It was emphasised that all the

Kottayam Incorporated

district officers and all their subordinates at the subdivision, taluk and village levels had to be present. For example, the police would be represented by the superintendent, the deputy superintendent of the subdivision, the circle inspector and the station house officer. All the parties to the litigation would be also there as the police would have ensured their presence. The petitioner would be asked to explain his problem and the expected solution. The counter-petitioner could also come out with his version of the story. Then it would be discussed with all present as to what could be a feasible solution. There always had to be give and take, and in most cases, a compromise solution was evolved which was acceptable to both the parties concerned. Once there was a solution, it was put in writing and the concerned parties had to sign the agreement. It would be the responsibility of the SHO to ensure the implementation of the compromise solution. But everything, except monetary settlements, had to be completed during the course of the day itself, so that people did not have to go back to the SHO for follow-up action later. Once a petition had been dealt with, the next petitioner was called and the procedure continued.

My instruction to the department heads was very simple. These petitions had to be disposed of. This did not mean that they could give just any reply and get away with it. Officers were encouraged to be positive in their outlook. We would approach the petition with a determination to grant what was asked for. If the application was, say, for a ration card, it had to be given to the petitioner at the programme itself. If, for some reason, it could not, the officer concerned had to explain in writing why it could not be sanctioned. The petitioner could then appeal to the district collector who would visit every department many times during the course of the day. The collector would sit along with the officers and the petitioners and decide on the appeal then and there.

At all these programmes, special medical camps were organised at the venue itself where specialists from the medical college

Making a Difference

participated. Kottayam Medical College did not have a department for cancer detection and specialists from the Regional Cancer Centre would come for these programmes. We had also tied up with service organisations like the Rotarians and the Lions for distribution of free spectacles. All those who came to the programme were encouraged to undergo a medical examination as they would not normally get such an opportunity in the panchayat. Where follow-up treatment was required they were asked to come to the Medical College on appointed dates.

At 1 o'clock, there was a lunch break. The panchayats would have arranged lunch for all those who came for the programme including the petitioners. At the first programme, when the number of petitions was only 215, there were about 800 people for the lunch. Eventually, when we had over 4,000 petitions, the panchayats had to lay out lunch for about 10,000 people. Government officials were not permitted to be involved with organising the lunches. It had to be done by the elected panchayat members. The necessary provisions for the lunch were always donated by the merchants of the area. There was never a shortage. The lunch would be served in typical Kerala style, on banana leaves. There would always be payasam, a special Onam delicacy made of rice, coconut milk and spices. From the minister to the last petitioner, everybody sat at the same bench and table and ate his fill. There was no discussion about petitions at lunch time. There was, however, plenty of curry and laughter.

By 5 p.m., most of the petitions would have been disposed of. After this, the winding up programme would start. This was an elaborate function which took three hours to complete. Every district officer, starting with the SP, had to come on the stage and explain the action taken on each petition. Any petitioner who was not satisfied with the manner in which his petition was dealt with could raise his hand and in full public view take on the officer. As a result officers could not get away without satisfying people; they were made accountable to the people, to the last petitioner. Any minister

Kottayam Incorporated

who came for the inaugural function and the MLAs and MPs were allowed to leave only after the winding up programme.

During the next three-and-a-half years, a 'To the People' programme was held every month. In a year's time, half the panchayats in the district had been covered. In two years, all the panchayats had been covered. Sometimes we had to club three panchayats together. The criteria for the selection of panchayats was the distance from the headquarters. All outlying panchayats, which had poor communication facilities, were covered first, as it would have been rather difficult for these people to interact with the district officials on a regular basis. When the entire district was covered once, we ran the programme for a second time. In all, about thirty-five of these programmes were held during my tenure, and around 25,000 petitions dealt with.

The system of officials going to the villages to help resolve people's problems is not new. It has been carrying on since the British Raj. But somehow the practice does not seem to have produced remarkable results. This is because the collector does not have sufficient time to enquire into the petitions received before he leaves the village. No officer can be expected to take a decision on the spot regarding any serious matter which requires the checking up of records. Consequently, the district collectors at these camps generally end up as dak collectors. On their return to headquarters, the representations received become files, and meet the fate files do. The only consolation is that people have had the opportunity to meet the collector and voice their grievances. Over time, people have begun to lose their faith in the ability of the government to sort out their problems. They have lost faith because the district collectors, who were the representatives of the government in the districts, have not been able to generate faith in the official machinery. 'To the People' was a means by which the official machinery reached out to those it was meant to serve. At last their longstanding grievances could be redressed.

Making a Difference

No additional expenditure was incurred by the administration for organising these programmes. Therefore no sanction was necessary from any authority for the purpose. Any other collector can do the same as effectively as was done at Kottayam. I got to know people during these programmes; I got to know their problems; I got to know how best they could be solved. There is no point feeling jealous about my becoming popular. I worked for it!

The elected representatives were made a part of the exercise. They competed with each other to make the programme in their areas a success. Smart politicians made capital out of the programme. If something was succeeding, they wanted to be part of it.

In addition to this programme, there were other steps I took to streamline the system. I used to meet 200 visitors per day, singly and *i* in groups. I would see visitors at the official residence from 7 to 9.30 in the morning. Those who could not come to see me at the office were encouraged to see me at home so that they did not have to take leave from the office to see me. All district collectors have very spacious bungalows for their residential accommodation, so it was possible to segregate the private area from the camp office. My official residence was one of the largest bungalows in Kerala. Five rooms were set apart exclusively for the camp office and visitors. Visitors used to be received in the collectorate office from 10 to 5. I devised a simple method by which a petition could be dealt with systematically and with speed.

The collector's chamber was a very large hall, with good air-conditioning. Just outside the office there was a visitors' room where everybody could be seated very comfortably. I had two of my officers sit in the visitors' room helping applicants draft representations. A foolscap sheet was used for writing a petition. It was folded vertically and the petition written on the right half of the paper, with the left half of the paper left blank. The description of the problem would be very brief. Once the petition was written, the visitors walked into the collector's room, where a large number of

Kottayam Incorporated

chairs were available; here they would sit and wait for their turn. Instead of their being called one by one into the room, they could come in and witness the proceedings. A lot of the problems were of a common nature. Thus there was transparency in dealing with people. Nobody was discriminated against as everybody who had similar problems was listening in to what the collector's decision was. If a relief was granted to somebody, he could demand the same for himself.

After hearing out a petitioner, I would write my instructions on the left half of the paper, addressed to the officer concerned. For example, if action was to be taken by the sub-collector, the note would be addressed to him, if by the village officer, it would go to him. The directions were always very simple, something like this: 'I have heard the petitioner, examined the documents; kindly get the mutation done by 1st January, 1989.' I always specified a date. If the documents presented to me were not enough or if they needed verification, I would order the officers concerned to verify the documents and conduct local inspection, if necessary, but there was always a target date for implementation of the order.

After the order was issued, the paper was given to my orderly for photocopying on the machine kept outside. Both the original and the photocopy were given to the petitioner himself. It was his right and responsibility to deliver the original paper to the officer concerned. Giving the paper back to the petitioner had three advantages: first, my decision was known to the petitioner as well as to the implementing officer. Thereby the petitioner became aware of his right to demand implementation of what was ordered by the collector. The subordinate officer could not prevaricate about the matter. Second, there was a time frame within which the work had to be done. Third, it saved time. Usually what happens in a government office is, if the representation given by, say, a villager is accepted by the district collector, then it goes down to his deputy and finally reaches the clerk; there, the paper is to be put on file and

Making a Difference

returned to the collector for his decision. This can take weeks or even months. Once it comes to the collector, he will forward the paper to the subordinate office which is expected to make its report. This again takes time. From there it will go down to the taluk office and finally reach the village office, from where a report will come back to the collector's office and then the file will be put up. Finally the file is seen by the collector and orders issued to the subordinate office which again follows the same procedure. It takes months and years for any work to be done in any government office because, first of all, it is impossible for the petitioner to track his file from one office to the other. Secondly, even if it is traced, it is impossible to get the report. The petitioner has to chase the paper from one office to the other. The only way to find it is to bribe the staff concerned, from the orderly upwards. Nothing gets done in the normal course. In my system all this was not there. The directions were delivered to the officer concerned immediately. It saved postage. It also saved a lot of administrative expenditure.

In the normal course, if I met 200 visitors a day, 200 files had to be opened at the collector's office, the same number of files opened at each of the subordinate offices, i.e., sub-collector's office, taluk office, revenue inspector's office and the village office. Thus for every petition, there would be five files existing simultaneously. Under the system I had devised, as the petition was given back to the petitioner, no file was opened at the collector's office. If the work was to be done by the village office, I would not send the paper to the village officer through the sub-collector-tehsildar-revenue inspector route. It would go straight to the village officer as he was the authority to execute and implement the order. Thus files were not created in the other offices, and since files were not created, staff in various offices could be spared and eventually a lot of posts could be abolished, saving a lot of money for the government. Officers to whom I had marked the petition were always at liberty to come back to me immediately if there was any problem in

Kottayam Incorporated

the implementation of the order. It was their responsibility to ensure that the facts mentioned by the petitioner were correct. I was always accessible; any officer could walk into my room at any time and explain the situation. If the facts were wrong, it was the responsibility of the sub-officer to come back to me and get revised orders. But the date for implementation of the order had a lot of sanctity and had to be adhered to. The petitioner was also expected to get back to these officers by the deadline. If the work was not done, the petitioner was expected to come back to me. This time he did not have to write a fresh petition. He would come to me with the copy of my earlier order and I would reiterate it, giving a fresh date for its execution. The earlier procedure was then repeated.

If it was still not done, the petitioner had to come back to me along with the copy of the petition with him. This time I would ask the village officer to see me along with the petitioner. On the appointed date the officer would come along with the petitioner and explain to me why the earlier orders were flouted. This would be like a public trial. Imagine a sub-collector, a tehsildar, a revenue inspector or a village officer, who are powerful figures in their areas, having to appear in a public trial before their own people. This fear ensured that officers did not flout my orders. In my entire term as district collector, I had to summon officers along with the petitioner to my chamber only on six occasions. This is incredible because I was meeting on an average 200 visitors a day. When officers came to a public hearing, I would listen to both the petitioner as well as my officer, examine the documents produced by both the sides and take a decision. Again a date would be fixed by which time the orders would have to be carried out. If the orders were not carried out, disciplinary action would be taken against the officer concerned. This necessity, however, never arose.

In most offices, the district collector and the controlling officer will not even know whether a representation has been considered favourably and the work done because files in most cases do not even

Making a Difference

come back to the DC, even if the representation was given personally to him by the petitioner.

I did not seek any permission for introducing my system. There was no need for it. It is left to the controlling officers to devise systems which produce results. The system I devised was simplicity itself; it was a common-sense solution. Ultimately the system was about trusting people. It was transparent.

There is a total lack of transparency in government functioning; even if a paper concerns a petitioner it will not be given to him because whatever is written on it is expected to be a secret. I do not understand why we have to be secretive in dealing with such papers. Why couldn't a representation on which I had issued orders be seen by the petitioner ? What was wrong if he delivered it to the subordinate office? If decisions are taken based on objective analysis, there is no reason to hide the decisions from the public; it is not as though we are dealing with the manufacture of nuclear bombs in every file. My system was devised in the belief that people had the right to know what had happened to their representations. The best way, I felt, was for them to read and understand what was being ordered. This way they would not be at the mercy of petty officers. This also ensured that the subordinate offices did not make money. If the collector was accessible and was issuing timebound orders which had to be implemented there was very little the subordinate officer could do to make money because money is paid only when the work is not done. Even as simple a thing as easy access to the controlling officer can help wipe out corruption to a great extent.

Most government officers in this country are not accessible to the public. They meet the public only on certain fixed days of the week and that too at certain hours. Often, on these days, the officer may be busy elsewhere—perhaps in a meeting—and may not meet his visitors at all. This leaves one with very little choice but to go back to a subordinate office where money has to be paid for getting things done. I am of the opinion that senior officers, especially district

Kottayam Incorporated

collectors, should see visitors every day and at any time without prior appointment. I was very systematic in my scheduling. I used to have on an average five meetings a day. After every meeting I would deal with all the petitioners before I started with the next meeting. This ensured that people did not have to wait for a long time to meet me. It was also made very clear that anybody who came to see me in the morning could see me before I went for lunch.

I put a board behind my seat: 'Kottayam Incorporated'. We meant business. My meetings were so arranged that I would get sufficient time to meet the public. I laid down a rule: no meeting would be for more than twenty-nine minutes. If it went beyond that I assumed that it was badly organised. In any case I would wind up as scheduled. As a result all the officers concerned came prepared and decision-making was quick. In most cases we had a decision in twenty-nine minutes. Most officers do not learn the art of running government offices in a businesslike manner. Meetings go on for hour upon fruitless hour. Even if decisions are taken, there is little follow up on their implementation. Bureaucrats are in a perpetual spin of meetings, seminars and conferences, where tonnes of papers are consumed and gallons of tea emptied discussing ways and means to deliver goods and services to the people. Unfortunately all this remains on paper. When the people for whose benefit all this is done come to demand goods and services, they do not even have the courtesy to meet them. One has to try and locate an acquaintance who knows the officer to put in a word. This is a very sorry state of affairs in a democracy.

There are a lot of officers who are accessible to the public. However, this is no help if their petitions end up as files in their offices and in the subordinate offices and fail to move. Petitioners then begin their regular visits to the collector's office to chase their files; no work ever gets done unless a dozen trips are made to the collectorate. Even after all that there is no guarantee of success. In most of the cases the applicants have to pay money to push their files

Making a Difference

from one seat to the other. The decision-making process in this country is such that the file has to go through at least half a dozen people before it reaches a decision-maker.

Even after all this, when the file reaches the boss, most bosses raise half a dozen queries because they believe that unless they do so, they are not doing justice to their jobs. We are marvellous at work of this kind. We are taught at the National Academy of Administration that we have to apply our minds. Therefore, everybody applies his mind and no decision is taken. We are a nation of perfect query masters. The more senior you become the better query master you are. Even if a petitioner sees a senior officer for the umpteenth time, he will not take the trouble to call for the file immediately and settle the matter. The petitioner will be told that the matter will be looked into. This is the best way to shake off an adamant petitioner. The next time he comes he will be informed that the application is under active consideration. Nobody in the government in any office is willing to guarantee to the public when a matter would be disposed of, either positively or negatively.

Almost every government office in the country treats the public like dirt. Nobody ever goes to a government office and comes out with his dignity intact. If a request has been turned down, no official will take the trouble of explaining to the petitioner why the request has been turned down. If the petitioner persists, he will be told that it is none of his business. Any questioning of the official is seen as questioning the sovereign authority of the state. A citizen has the right to know why he is being denied something which he believes is his right. But in this country he has no right to know.

I think the main reason why there is total hostility towards revealing the rationale for a decision is because most of our decisions are questionable in some way. There is indiscriminate use of discretionary power, from the babu to the district magistrate to the cabinet secretary to ministers. When discretionary power is used indiscriminately and there is no rationale behind decisions, the

Kottayam Incorporated

government certainly has to be very careful about protecting the secrecy of the decision-making process. This is the main reason why we refuse to divulge to the public even the minimum information about their own cases. I think this is totally undemocratic; if a request is turned down a citizen has the right to know why it has been turned down and the officer has the responsibility to inform the person concerned both orally and in writing the reasons why it was turned down. Most IAS officers do not take the trouble to do so. If IAS officers do not take the trouble, we cannot blame the lesser mortals.

The Indian bureaucracy is the most powerful bureaucracy in the world; we adopted a centralised and planned administrative set-up which gave autocratic powers to the bureaucracy at all levels, from the minister to village officers. The Indian bureaucracy is drunk with power. Now, after nearly fifty years of independence, it controls the life of every citizen from birth to death. At every moment the citizen has to depend on the bureaucracy for survival. They are the dispensers of favours—at a price. We threw out the colonial masters to become the slaves of a self-serving bureaucracy. Its self-interest is served either by monetary gain or by something which feeds its ego. It is not that everybody is corrupt; certainly not. I enjoy power. Some enjoy power for the sake of power itself. Some use it for making money. Very few use it to do good. The power of the bureaucracy is reflected in this arrogance, all the way down the hierarchy. Everybody is drunk with it.

If the President of India were to walk into a government office, the babu would treat him like dirt. I know a lot of senior officers who had to pay bribes to get their ration cards and electricity connections. We do not let anybody live with dignity. Nobody is willing to meet the public. If they meet, they are not willing to listen. If they listen, they do not listen to you with courtesy, like human beings. If they listen to you with courtesy, they will not do your work. I have argued for an open-door policy wherever I have worked; my bosses have always told me that for security reasons they cannot allow people

Making a Difference

into the office without restrictions. Why can't officers meet the public with a smile and listen to their problems? Most officers would say that they do not have time.

This is an excuse. When I was the district collector, I used to meet 200 visitors a day. I used to preside over five meetings on the average. I used to spend at least two hours in the villages every day, mostly making speeches on literacy and family planning. In spite of having spent so much time outside my office, my district, Kottayam, was the best administered district in the country. It had a quality of health index higher than that of the USA. From file disposal to family planning to everything else, Kottayam was always the best.

The time spent in meeting my visitors did not prevent me from doing my job as well as anybody else. It took great effort to meet so many people. It took great effort to listen to them and take decisions in each of the cases. It was tiring, it was time consuming, but it was totally satisfying. Therefore, if there is a desire to do something, we can do it. We can meet all the people who want to meet us, we can get their work done. We have hundreds of excuses for not doing so; no wonder that this nation is in the state of affairs in which it is so long after independence.

A Need Fulfilled

The district collector was also the chairman of the Kottayam Medical College development committee. There were no facilities available for detection or treatment of cancer in Kottayam or the adjoining districts despite the fact that the incidence of cancer was very high in the district. The nearest full-fledged cancer hospital was at Trivandrum. It was set up by Dr Krishna Nair, a committed and capable doctor.

Dr P.G. Ramakrishna Pillai, the superintendent of the Medical College, used to be my one-man think tank at Kottayam. He averaged two ideas a week, most of which were highly ambitious. One day,

during a brainstorming session, we came up with the idea that something should be done for treatment of cancer in the district, and decided upon a 150-bed cancer hospital within the Medical College campus for the purpose. The hospital would be set up with public contribution. I had collected bagfuls of money from the public for various schemes as DC; almost everything that we did had a big chunk of public contribution. But this hospital project would be done exclusively with public money.

We asked a couple of magazines and newspapers whether they would help us in raising money. They said they would give publicity to the project. One of the magazines agreed to help raise the funds also. So we worked out a plan of action. The magazine, *Mangalam*, a weekly with a circulation of over a million copies, took up the job of selling the project. It came out with a series of four articles on cancer and its treatment, followed by two articles on the cancer centre which we proposed to build. After their publication, the magazine announced a price increase of 10 paise per issue for the next four issues. This amount would go towards the construction of the hospital. We laid the foundation stone of the hospital on 1 June 1990 with a cheque from me. It was my one month's salary. This was the only money we had in hand when we laid the foundation stone. We announced that the hospital would be fully equipped and operational on the first of June the next year. The chief minister, who laid the foundation stone, did not believe us because we had no money; such projects take many years to complete even when funds are readily available. The inauguration took place on the due date. It was done by the chief minister. The hospital was perhaps built with the largest number of contributors anywhere in the world, 8.2 million people. If the Guinness Book of Records has such a category, it would probably merit an entry. The entire sum was collected and spent within a year. We even had Rs. 10 lakh to spare.

My district had only a population of two million, which means that 6.2 million people from outside it contributed to the project. How

Making a Difference

did we do it? We inspired people to get involved with the project. I encouraged people to contribute whatever they could, even if it was just a rupee. Most of the schoolchildren in the district contributed a rupee. Every government employee contributed at least one day's salary. I do not think that there were many people in the district who did not give anything. The media picked up our story and it became a people's project. People had a lot of faith in us, and their participation meant that they became involved with the success of the project. For a whole year I was travelling around talking about the cancer project and other pet projects of mine like literacy. We built up people's confidence; anything that we marketed was always lapped up by the public. We sold real dreams to people and they were always there in the forefront to make our dreams bigger than what we ever imagined. We inspired people because we had done things which were phenomenally successful; they believed in us. Hundreds of people used to visit the site to see how the building was coming up. We encouraged them to come up with suggestions. It was not merely bricks and mortar that we were putting up, we were making something that people could identify with. Public institutions are generally soulless affairs. My cancer hospital will always have a soul because it symbolises the collective soul of 8.2 million people.

The Literacy Campaign

On 12 June 1989 Kottayam town was declared to be the first 100 per cent literate town in India. Kottayam district with a population of two million people went on to become the district with the highest literacy in the world. The district achieved a quality of health index higher than that of the United States. The People's Education and Literacy Campaign, Kottayam (PELCK) also incorporated fifteen special campaigns involving all the inhabitants of the district in the literacy drive. The special campaigns included: Read more books campaign, Green the city campaign, Consumer

Kottayam Incorporated

guidance campaign, Keep Kottayam clean campaign, Physical fitness campaign, Savings campaign, Traffic sense campaign, Immunisation campaign, Campaign against smoking, Campaign against alcoholism, Campaign against drugs, Cancer education campaign, Legal literacy campaign and Vegetable cultivation campaign. The intention was to bring about a definite improvement in the quality of life of not only the illiterates but of everyone else.

The project was conceptualised by the Mahatma Gandhi University under the leadership of U.R. Anantha Murthy. I came in only when they realised that the collector would be the best person to coordinate a project of this magnitude.

A detailed survey was conducted by the National Service Scheme volunteers of the university. The survey was intended to study not only illiteracy but also living standards. The questionnaire was elaborate, probing into details of income, community, housing, health, diseases, cultural activities, habits, amenities and details of the members of the family.

Before the campaign was launched, we had to sell the idea to the public. I got in touch with all the newspapers published from Kerala and got a commitment that they would set apart a quarter of a page every day in their newspapers for the campaign. All the leading newspapers also had correspondents stationed at Kottayam exclusively to cover the literacy programme. We used television and radio to sell the idea to people. We had churches, temples and mosques preaching literacy. I spent at least two hours every day in the viljages talking literacy. Since we were the pioneers, it was not easy. Some people argued that since Kottayam already had a very high percentage of literacy the project was not important. It took a lot of persuasion, but we managed to convince all of them eventually.

In addition, we had to recruit volunteers and train them. The minimum qualification for a volunteer was anyone who had completed class ten, but we were not rigid about it. As long as the motivation was high, a lesser qualification would do. Thus we had

Making a Difference

an eight-year-old volunteer teaching an eighty-year-old lady, her grandmother.

The volunteers came in slowly; when we got the required volunteers, we put them through a very interactive training. We were helped greatly by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) which trained the volunteers and resource persons. The KSSP has been campaigning for literacy in the state for the past many decades and has done a remarkable job. It is also a pioneer in spreading the scientific temper among people, especially among students and farmers.

The literacy project was a combined operation of the university, municipality and the administration. It was funded by the Ministry of Youth Affairs through the university. The vice-chancellor and the municipal chairman were the livewire leaders who led the campaign. The municipal chairman, Mani Abraham, was one of the most inspired politicians I have ever come across. He was fairly rustic and not highly educated by Kerala standards. But he had the fire in him, especially where literacy was concerned. But the most inspired person in the entire campaign was Thomas Abraham, the National Service Scheme coordinator in the university. I have never seen a man with as much commitment to what he was doing. He could inspire even a stone into action. He was highly articulate. He lived in one room in a hotel because he could not get the time to go home which was just five kilometres away from the town. He hardly slept any time throughout the campaign. It was amazing how inspired people could be. I really believe that if we have a few people like Thomas Abraham in this country and if they are allowed to do a job, they should be able to transform the country within a short period. We don't let them.

Since the aim of the campaign was to make every citizen of Kottayam in the age group of six to sixty literate, it was important

Kottayam Incorporated

that the message reach every nook and corner of the town, particularly to those who were the potential learners. During our survey we had found that more than half the illiterates were just not interested in learning at all. We had to first of all reach out to the ones who were willing to learn. Once they started learning the 'stigma' attached to learning probably would go and the others would also participate. Each of the recalcitrant ones had to be dealt with individually. The joy of converting a non-believer into a believer was a great one, and there were a number of strategies we used to accomplish our purpose.

Personal contact

The houses of all the learners were visited many times by the municipal councillors and the NSS volunteers. The visits were meant to convert the non-learners to the idea. Many of these visits were fruitful and there were many converts to the cause. Those who agreed to learn were attached to voluntary teachers. These were mostly from the neighbourhood, usually youngsters, many of them not highly educated themselves. The most encouraging factor was the presence of a large number of women and girls who came forward to teach. Since most of them were neighbours to their pupils, it was easier for them to persuade the illiterates. We even engaged psychologists and sociologists to handle the very difficult cases. We handled every illiterate individually. Personal contact was the most important strategy used by us in the programme.

Plays and poetry

We used music, drama and folk arts to drive home the message of literacy to the people. Literacy poetry began to emerge. Paroor Sreedharan wrote ten literacy poems. One of these poems was set

Making a Difference

to music by Mavelikkara Gopinath. Believe it or not, the rest of the poems were set to music by one of our voluntary workers Kunjumon. Kunjumon, incidentally, was a headload worker. He formed a team of singers from the wards. Some of them were learners. They toured several of the wards performing in slums and street corners. The songs were inspiring, not only to the learners but also to the general public. Several other wards also set up their own choir groups. The songs conveyed the message that man became human only if he started learning the written word, that education was essential if one did not want to get crushed under the wheels of the modern world. The Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad spent a whole week performing in all the wards. Their performances combining drama, music and folk lore drove home the message even to the strongest disbeliever. Manikanta Das scripted and directed a literacy drama which was performed by a troupe of artistes drawn from several wards. One of the elite schools put up a play directed by Manikanta Das to raise money for the literacy project. Though the amount raised was small, it was a fine gesture. Dancers from ward 24 performed a literacy dance in various wards. Pulari Brothers from Athirampuzha performed the Koladi programme, singing literacy songs specially composed for the campaign by K. Mohandas. We saw the emergence of what can be called 'literacy art'. During the campaign most of these contributions emerged mostly from the lower strata of the society, in whose lives the campaign would also have the greatest impact. A painting workshop was held at CMS College, two persons from each ward participating in the workshop. The theme of the workshop was literacy. It saw the expression of human dreams through the use of colour. It showed the aspiration of man to open his eyes and see the world through the written word. Wall posters and stickers played a major role in taking the message to the people. These were designed by artist Mathews John.

Kottayam Incorporated

Mass media

It was the newspapers who took the campaign to every home, not only in this town or district but to the whole state, and made it an issue in which thousands of people became deeply involved. Across the state our campaign became their campaign intellectually and morally and they were with us, supporting us with their encouragement. The newspapers highlighted the agony and ecstasy of those who refused to learn and those who started learning. Every case was unique, every case was worth reporting. No newspaper could carry all the stories, but they came up with the best and the most sensitive. This gave tremendous boost to the learners, the volunteers and to all those who were involved in the programme. The last ten days of the programme saw a count down by the press. It helped to focus the attention of the state towards this effort. With all eyes upon us, we could not fail. When we succeeded, they hailed our achievement with unreserved praise.

'Each one teach one'

Once the awareness had been created, we got down to the vital business of teaching. The method we adopted was that of 'each one teach one'. We had initially experimented with the method of getting all the learners into a central place in each location and teaching them there. But we found that the learners were such a heterogeneous group that no single teaching method could be effectively used with all the members of the group. Each one had to be tackled individually in her/his way starting from where she/he was. Some of them had a fairly advanced concept of the spoken language, whereas others were still at the elementary stage. Numerical ability was generally of good standard even though many of them did not know how to write numbers. Many of them could do fairly complicated calculations mentally. Another reason

Making a Difference

why we went for the 'each one teach one' method was because Keralites are highly individualistic and independent. Moreover, many of the illiterates were unwilling to show themselves as such. Many of them would agree to study but only in the privacy of their homes, without publicising that they were learners. There were a large number of such cases and it was much more effective for the teachers to go down to their houses and start the initial lessons. Besides, we realised that the most difficult task was to convince them to start learning. There were over a thousand cases in which the illiterates agreed to learn only after dozens of visits were made by various teams. Once the psychological barrier was breached they started learning in earnest. After that many of them were willing to assemble in their neighbours' houses and learn together.

Daily assessment

I used to have a brainstorming session with a core group of people every evening to evaluate the progress made during the day. These brainstorming sessions would generally start at midnight as I returned from my campaign in the villages very late. Every day we assessed what went right and what went wrong. Everybody was free to come up with ideas and suggestions. My core group had very few government officials; they were mostly people's leaders.

Involvement of politicians

We involved politicians right from the beginning. The people's representatives had to be convinced that this was their project and not just another government programme. We realised that the only way to get them involved was to ensure that the campaign was projected as something very high profile that would succeed dramatically well. Politicians love to be associated with success. Every MLA was made chairman of the campaign committee in his

constituency. It was his job to put together people and ensure that the campaign was successful.

This meant that MLAs had to sit around with people and plan out a strategy every day and come out with a plan of action which would reach out to everybody. We announced a prize for the best MLA. Any MLA who made his constituency the first in the district to become fully literate would be awarded the best MLA trophy. Similarly panchayat presidents were the chairmen of the campaign committees in the panchayats, with all the panchayat members also on the committees. All the panchayat presidents were made to compete with each other to prove who could be the best.

Kerala is a highly politicised state. We got every political party to campaign for the success of the programme. We became the supreme example of how to get politicians involved with projects of this nature. I made it very clear in my speeches that the people would evaluate their elected representatives by the results they produced in the literacy campaign. Thus it became a mandate for the politicians. It became a referendum for their political future. If they did not succeed, probably people would not vote them to power again.

On 2 June 1989 the count down began for the last ten days of the campaign. On the eve of the count down a conference was convened by the district collector at the collectorate conference hall. We found that there were still 118 people who were yet to begin learning. Of these, twelve were mental patients, thirty-six mentally retarded, fifteen were addicted to alcohol/drugs, sixteen were physically handicapped and twelve were seriously ill. It was not possible to teach these 91 people under any circumstances. The only ones we tried to persuade repeatedly were ten of the addicts. We had succeeded, during the course of the campaign, to bring to the fold over a hundred of them. These were the chronic ones we were unable to break through. We tried counselling. Sister Devotia, from Ernakulam, a specialist in counselling addicts, spent a whole week trying to help them. But these ten could not be helped. Some of the

Making a Difference

others who could not progress due to alcoholism were helped by her and were able to reduce their addiction and make progress in learning. Some of the mentally retarded took interest and wanted to learn, though they had been counted out of our target group. We tried to teach them, but the progress was very slow and many of them did not progress beyond writing their names with difficulty.

Excluding these cases we were left with twenty-seven people who had not yet started learning. The break-up of these twenty-seven was as follows: One case due to the refusal of the husband to allow his wife to learn; three cases due to religious reasons; seventeen cases where they were not permanent residents of the town; six cases in which the illiterates were totally opposed to learning. It was decided to leave out the seventeen illiterates who were not regular residents from this programme as they were not available in the town most of the time. This left us with just ten people when the count down began for the last ten days.

It was resolved that the district collector and the municipal chairman would visit all these ten cases personally and convince them to join the mainstream. The three cases in which they had refused to study due to religious reasons were dealt with by the municipal chairman. As they were all Muslims, we decided to take the assistance of maulvis so that we could deal with these cases in a way they were likely to find most agreeable. We wanted the maulvis to tell them that their religion did not oppose learning and that it promoted enlightenment among all sections of devotees. The municipal chairman accomplished the task without the assistance of the maulvis. The vice-chairman, P.N.K. Pillai, accompanied the municipal chairman. A very efficient job was done and all the three started writing in the presence of the municipal chairman himself. One case in which the learner was strongly opposed to the idea was dealt with by Thomas Abraham and Sister Cesil. It took a lot of persuasion.

The rest of the five cases, which were the hardest nuts to crack,

Kottayam Incorporated

were dealt with by me personally. I visited the homes of all these five adamant illiterates. It took hours to convince every one of them. Sometimes a little bit of the authority of the office had to be invoked. This finally convinced five of them to fall in line. Time was running out and only four days were left for the curtain to come down on the hundred-day campaign. Still there was one man, Kuttappan, left. One of the newspapers projected him as the only hurdle towards achievement of 100 percent literacy in the town. The papers predicted that Kuttappan would not budge and we would fail. Kuttappan was a very convinced man. He had his reasons.

Kuttappan had gone to school when he was seven years old. He had spent just seven days in school when he picked up a quarrel with one of his classmates. Kuttapan belonged to a scheduled tribe and his quarrel was with a high-caste boy. The headmaster summoned them both. Kuttappan wore no shirt and he had just a thin cloth tied on his waist. The headmaster struck him and gave him a dozen lashes on his buttocks. Kuttappan suffered the punishment, thinking that the other boy also was going to get the same treatment, but he was in for a shock. The headmaster let off the other boy without even a warning. It was a moment of indignation for him. Kuttappan flung his slate at his teacher's face. It struck the teacher on the forehead; it started bleeding. Kuttappan ran out. He did not go home, because he knew that his father would finish him off when he came to know about his misconduct. He hid in a neighbour's house for a week. His father tracked him down there, caught him and tied him up for the next three days. He vowed before God that he would never learn letters. He kept his promise.

He was now forty-five years old and a grandfather. He was not willing to break the promise. It was the vow of a man against the vow of a town. Various teams met him at his home. He was pleasant to them, narrated his story and nobody could convince him. Even the municipal councillor, who was a very respected man in the ward, could not convince Kuttappan. On 6 June he threatened to commit

Making a Difference

suicide if he was pestered any further. The case was before the district collector. It was Kottayam district vs Kuttappan.

I went down to his house with Thomas Abraham and Biju George, the local NSS volunteer, and a few voluntary teachers. It was around 7 o'clock in the evening. Kuttappan as usual was pleasant. He was smoking a beedi very contentedly. The sight of the collector made him nervous and he puffed deep at his beedi. But he was firm that he would not budge. We entered the hut, which was hardly five feet away from the railway line. We were offered a seat on the mud floor. We sat down and exchanged pleasantries. The moment of reckoning had come and the subject was broached. The response was immediate: 'No.' Anything else but letters. He explained the reason why he was such a convinced man. He said, 'A tribal will never get justice even if he learns.' He said that if it had been a vow taken before any of the local shrines he would have broken it, but as this was a vow taken by an innocent mind before an invisible God it could not be broken. We tried to convince him that he had to know how to calculate numbers to survive and to get fair wages when he went to work. He was a tree climber who plucked coconuts. The collector asked him how much was 97 minus 16. Prompt came the reply, 'Who does not know that 97 minus 16 is 81?' He was proud of his abilities. He could manage his life. But he could not write. He had boarded the wrong bus a few times because he could not read the destination board correctly. As a precaution, he always carried a little extra money. He did not grudge it; these were hurdles one had to face, he rationalised. We spent an hour with Kuttappan. A train roared by and shook the hut. Kuttapan remained firm. We were at a dead end. A different strategy had to be used. But what?

There was no answer.

I told Kuttappan, 'You have to study.'

'I will not.'

'You have to.'

'I will not, even if I have to lose my head.'

Kottayam Incorporated

At this point I called my securityman, Simon, and asked him to take Kuttappan to the police station in the van. Of course he was not taken to the police station. He was taken to my residence. His wife was also around; she wanted him to learn because she herself was one of the most enthusiastic learners in our campaign.

At my residence Kuttappan and his wife, Kochupennu, sat with Thomas Abraham and others who tried to persuade him. He just smiled. Thomas Abraham whispered into his ears that this collector could be a very dangerous man if crossed but he would be very nice if he was cooperative. I came in and sat down near him. What would he like for dinner, I asked him. He certainly was not expecting this! He said he liked fish curry and rice. Fish curry and rice were ordered in the kitchen and they were ready in ten minutes. My wife is a very fast cook. She also makes superb fish. Kuttappan and Kochupennu liked the fish. There was chicken curry too. He did not like chicken. When the dinner was over I asked him again whether he would agree to learn. He replied that a promise given to God could not be broken. I replied that my residence was situated at Devalokam (which means the abode of the gods in Malayalam) and we all lived in the world of gods and therefore he could break his vow here. I put his hand out. There was no response from Kuttappan. Kochupennu encouraged him to put out his hand and break the vow. It took thirty long seconds. He lifted his hand, brought it down and put it over my hand. We searched for a notebook and a pencil. Simon borrowed a book and a pencil from my son. Kuttappan and I sat down. He was ready to write the first word: his own name. 'No,' he said. 'It would be a crime to do that without a *dakshina*.' He extracted a rupee coin from the tuck of his lungi. It was handed over to the guru: myself. Kuttappan wrote his name, then his wife's name. The coin has found a place in my purse. It is the most treasured souvenir of my life.

Kuttappan's is just one story. I have thousands of other stories. Some are very exciting, some fairly dull. But each is an example of determination against odds.

Making a Difference

There were lots of people around who were very sceptical about our campaign. They felt we were chasing a mirage. Most of them have turned believers now. There are still a few critics. Some question whether we identified all the illiterates. They ask whether all the illiterates identified were made literate. Some of the critics argue that very little was taught and that of little use. Each of these doubts has to be answered. Identification of illiterates was done through a household survey by the NSS volunteers. This survey raised questions not only regarding literacy but regarding every aspect of life in the household. A complete recheck was done on every household. There was again a second counter check on the names of illiterates through a declaration that had to be signed by every household. The methodology of checking illiteracy was a very simple one—they were asked to write. If they were able to write and calculate numbers one considered them to be literate in our scheme. Some might ask: 'Is this what is meant by being literate?' My answer would be: 'My aim was to equip them with the very basics, so that they could read and write and calculate and thus be more independent.' Some critics are not satisfied with this approach.

Regarding the issue whether all the illiterates identified have been taught, we can confidently say that they all started learning, except the persons whose cases were earlier explained. Half the illiterates were unwilling to learn when the programme was launched. Those willing to learn were handled first and most of them made excellent progress. Some of them have even begun writing novels*and autobiographies. Many of these stories, we believe, would be very exciting. P.V. Thampi alias Abdul Azeez had progressed to the third chapter of his autobiography, titled 'The Sea of Tears', by the time we ended the campaign. Those unwilling to learn had to be handled case by case, and each day we managed to convert dozens of them to the cause. A few hundred of them could be persuaded only during the last thirty days. Many started to learn only in the last fortnight of the campaign. The last one joined the crusade only on 6

Kottayam Incorporated

June. All these people certainly would not have learnt to read and write by our D-Day. But they had all begun.

After D-Day we continued with our programme with the same vigour. Learning never ends. We all keep learning if we want to remain human. Everyone in the city embarked upon the mission—that was our success. They may not have been able to read Kumaranasan or Vallathol. But even the ability to write would make a big difference in their lives. If a person can write his name and put his signature on a piece of paper, the bank manager will consider his loan application more sympathetically. He may board the right bus. Write a letter and address it correctly. Widen his choices enormously, instead of having to depend on others for as simple a thing as reading a signboard. It is the big leap forward. It is sheer joy for an illiterate to be able to write his name, his wife's name. It is a discovery. It is easy to be dismissive. But who are we to say that they have no right to such joy?

We did not stop with hundred days. We went on. The NSS volunteers were to be in the wards for six months more. The teachers continued their effort and brought up most of the learners to a level where they were able to handle language independently. When the schools and colleges opened after the summer vacations, many of our voluntary teachers went back to them as they were students. Most of them were locals. We had to maintain their enthusiasm for at least another six months. We had regular workshops on holidays, and held street corner meetings as often as we could. We could not let the flame die even though the flag had come down.

Our campaign broke three myths about Kerala. The myths were:

—In a place like Kerala a literacy programme of this nature has no relevance, because Kerala is already the most literate state in the country. Kottayam district and Kottayam municipality already had the highest literacy rate in Kerala when we started.

—Even if there were a few illiterates, we would not be able to locate them, and even if they were located, they would not come

forward to learn.

—Nothing can succeed in our political system.

All these myths were debunked in Kottayam during those hundred days. No democracy can work meaningfully unless the last citizen is literate. They had to be given an opportunity. We managed to locate them. Many of them were amenable to the idea. Some were not; they had to be persuaded. It was a tremendous task. But the city woke up and responded. The myth which we were most happy to disprove was that in our political system no such effort can succeed. Once the cause was sold to them, every political party tried to beat everybody else, not by mud slinging but by reaching out to the slums and huts at the earliest.

The municipal chairman, an avowed Marxist, set the trend. For him literacy was an essential for the working class. He spent almost the entire hundred days in the wards setting the trend for other municipal councillors to follow. The opposition leader in the municipal council, N.K. Poduval, was a Congress(I) stalwart. He took the theme and the campaign to the wards in an unprecedented effort. The enthusiasm spread. Every municipal councillor vied with his counterparts in reaching out to his ward. There was a fervour in their appeal that was missing even in their political campaigns. In every ward a literacy flag was hoisted on 4 March. Any ward which had achieved 100 percent literacy could bring down the flag. So there was a mad rush—it was all for the good. Greying old men competed with the younger councillors, like schoolchildren competing in the 100-metre sprint. The competition helped. The campaign spirit caught on in the wards and this was one of the factors that led many a reluctant learner to come forward. Suddenly they realised that everyone was jumping on to the bandwagon and they were ashamed to be left out. Even the ward councillors who were slow to respond got drawn into the excitement. They jumped in, though maybe reluctantly. Thus we had them all together, politicians of all hues, working sincerely for a cause together, competing. Never before had

all of them come together in the past. They may have paid lip service to a cause in the past if it suited them. But now there was sincerity in their hearts; it could be seen, it could be heard. Who said no politician has a heart? There were times when we could see these politicians overwhelmed by the joy of the people of their wards.

Another impact of the programme was that these illiterate people, mostly in the slums, instead of being anonymous creatures whom even the postman did not recognise, became a focal point not only in Kottayam town, but in the whole state. The postman began to recognise Krishankutty, P.V. Thampi, Mariam, Kuttappan, Karunakaran and many others. The press carried their stories across the state. These faceless, ordinary people became celebrities overnight. There were reporters outside their homes waiting for an interview.

The newspapers could not carry all their stories. But there was much of interest in what each person had to say. Self-respect began to emerge. They began to look up. Many of them began learning secretly. But when they realised that it was becoming respectable to learn, many of them came out and sat together—many of them late at night because they were out the whole day working. Many of them had a session with their teachers early in the morning before going out to the field. Those working in teashops found time between customers. Their teachers went down to these roadside stalls and waited for an opportunity to get a few minutes from their learners. Many of these learners had never had visitors in their homes before. But now some of them complained of a little too many. They were being recognised as part of their town, their society. They surely must have felt a certain elation at being wanted. It was made out that their effort was crucial not only for themselves but to others too. This gave them a certain feeling of importance.

Can the learner's newfound confidence in himself and others be maintained? Yes. Provided he begins to use this ability in everyday life. 'Does it ensure him freedom?' somebody might ask. Nobody is

Making a Difference

fully free. But he has the freedom to make many more choices than he earlier had.

Many of the sceptics would be amused if it were even suggested that there was a marked improvement in society due to the literacy programme. But it is so. There was a definite change in the atmosphere in the colonies. There were a large number of illiterate drunkards and drug addicts. Most of them were opposed to learning. Even if any of them wanted to learn they could not because they would not be able to distinguish between a pencil and a pumpkin any time after 6 p.m. They would not be available before that because they left for the workplace in the morning.

The volunteers caught one such man, Rajan, in the morning, when he was sober, and he agreed to learn. He agreed to come home straight from work instead of going to the arrack shop so that he could learn. He did not come home early as promised. When he did come, his approach could be heard from afar. He reached home, supported by friends, at 9 p.m. But he had the strength to beat up his wife. He had to do it because he had always done so. Then, of course, he had to be given his dinner. It did not matter that his five children and wife were near starvation. He gulped down whatever was served, not without cursing his wife again with a hundred choice Malayalam abuses. He slept and was woken up early at 6 by familiar faces. They were back again. The literacy brigade.

They asked him, 'Why did you not come home early as promised, so that you could learn?' He had no answer. He promised to come home early that day. He kept his promise. He turned up sharp at 6 p.m. He was drunk but he had drunk much less. He sat down to write. His name was written on the notebook. No. He could not see properly. He could not hold the pencil properly. He felt ashamed.

Next day, he came home on time. This time he had drunk very little. He could hold the pencil and he could see the letters. He began to write. He was thrilled. He wanted to learn. He came home early every day, though not straight back from the field. But he drank less,

Kottayam Incorporated

because he wanted to learn. He did not want to make a fool of himself before his teacher, who was a young girl. He learnt to write and became one of our good learners. We had dozens of cases where drunkenness decreased considerably. Some gave up alcohol altogether. There was less violence at home now. The women did not get beaten up as often as they did earlier. There was more of cordiality in the family, and much less abusive language, because the teacher was present.

Another very positive effect of the campaign was the social cohesion that was created in the wards. Next-door neighbours who never visited each other began to drop in on each other. Many of them got together in the more spacious houses to sit down and learn collectively. The learning process was a binding one. Neighbours who were at each other's throats could not abuse each other in such company. Slowly the wounds healed. They began to talk. It became possible to be friendly again. There was freshness and a sense of bonding, all glued to a cause. This happened in most of the colonies.

People who had never visited slums suddenly found themselves frequenting these huts. A good number of the volunteers were from a middle class background. They had never experienced anything like this before. They began to identify themselves with the slum-dwellers. They spent a good bit of their time there, not only teaching, but also learning a good many things from them in turn. The concerns and fears of the poor and illiterate became the concerns of the volunteers. We could not have hoped for anything better than this.

Ultimately we see this project as a triumph of voluntarism. The government of India had financed only Rs.1.63 lakh for the project. The NSS volunteers were being paid only a token amount per month. There was no provision for any payment to be made to anybody else. We had to enrol at least a thousand volunteers to teach. We had to build the momentum and make the programme a people's movement. A lot of ground work had to be done. Both the vice-chancellor and

Making a Difference

the municipal chairman were deeply committed to the idea. Slowly support trickled in: from students, professors, lawyers, priests, nuns, doctors. Ten days before the launch of the programme, I convened a meeting of all concerned at the collectorate conference hall. The hall was overflowing with people. The vice-chancellor and the municipal chairman sold the idea very well. I used the people gathered there to take this lifetime opportunity to make a historical event possible right in their town. There was tremendous enthusiasm. The scheme was launched on 4 March. It was the big test for voluntarism. We appealed to anybody who could read and write to come forward and be a volunteer. Our NSS group visited houses canvassing volunteers. During the initial survey itself we had taken down the names of people who were willing to teach. Those who volunteered were put through a series of training programmes. The most important objective of these training programmes was to fire them with zeal. The municipal chairman and I addressed all these meetings. Once they had the commitment they had to be equipped with the methodology. We did not insist on any uniform technique. They would have to evolve their own techniques based on what would succeed with every learner. The learners were such a heterogeneous group, each with his own preoccupations, fears and prejudices. Each had to be handled in his own way and this was what each volunteer had to learn. No psychologist or sociologist could give them a standard package. Ultimately this was the secret of our success.

What was so remarkable about our volunteers was that most of them were from the slums themselves. They lived and breathed the same atmosphere. Many of them were headload workers. Some of them became the most committed votaries of the message. There was a revolutionary fervour in the air. Many of these lowly workers composed literacy poems, scripted plays and performed them, not only in their own wards but also elsewhere. The traditional Kerala arts, Kolukali and Kathakali, were performed with literacy music composed by these men.

Kottayam Incorporated

Our programme saw the triumph of women in society. The majority of our volunteers were women—most of them girls in colleges and schools—many of them drop-outs from poor families and the slums. Life did not hold out big dreams for these drop-outs. They never dreamt of making big news. They all spent dreary hours in the loneliness of their huts, cooking, washing clothes and looking after their younger sisters and brothers. When we approached them, many of them enrolled themselves enthusiastically and some reluctantly. We appealed to the students who had just done their SSLC examinations and were awaiting the results. They were at a very crucial period of their lives. Many of them responded. In each ward we formed a squad of ten of them. Hundreds of college and schoolgoing students, most of them girls, came forward. We realised that we had a very energetic group. We motivated them and instilled in them the spirit of the campaign. They went back and spread the message. They started teaching. They became crusaders. One had never seen such manifestation of woman power ever before anywhere else. When we saw their commitment we knew that we would not fail.

We did not in any way underestimate the role of the energetic young men who provided the leadership and did the ground work. In each ward there was a dynamic team of young men, mostly in their teens, living it up on the literacy bandwagon. They enjoyed doing it. There were also the senior citizens of each ward who gave their moral support. In many cases it was they who dealt with the stubborn ones.

We had the sympathy of the rich, but very few of them went into the field. They were mostly uninterested. We had only a handful of voluntary teachers from the rich and the affluent families. The service clubs, as they are called, did not bother. If they had cared, it would have been such a wonderful opportunity for them to prove that what they preached meant something to their members in their personal lives. Instead of being considered self-serving organisations in the eyes of the public, they could have given a new direction to their

Making a Difference

outlook. They missed the chance. Even though many of these clubs are doing some good projects, the public is generally not aware of them. Working with us could have given a new meaning to the bored lives of thousands of our well-fed women who drag on with their lives, some painfully and some with fun, viewing third-rate video movies and digging into gossip magazines with religious zeal. No, we do not grudge them. We only wish they had realised what it could have meant to their lives if they had felt with us and come out to be our crusaders. There were, of course, a few who understood us. There was this very distinguished lady from one of the most elite families of Kottayam who taught two persons. She was very committed. Every day she disappeared from home for about two hours. She was driven down to the colony in her car. She never told her sons where she was going because she did not know how her sons would react. Strange! For any son it would be cause for pride that his mother was involved in such a noble cause. We trust the sons are proud of their mother's commitment.

We had thirty-two hands. They were the National Service Scheme volunteers. They were the organisers of volunteers in each ward. These were the men and women, most of them very bright, who took the battle to the people. It is they who did the spade work. They mobilised the public and voluntary forces around the leadership of the municipal councillors. They were trained earlier to handle the issues that would come up. But in the field they had to be innovative. Many of them were from Kottayam town itself. There were a few who were from far away districts.

We paid them almost next to nothing. They could hardly survive on what we paid. But that did not deter them. Most of them were outstanding examples of commitment.

When I talked to my colleagues before launching the campaign in the town area most of them said that it was a crazy idea. When at the end of the campaign Kottayam was declared to be the first 100 percent literate town in India, many of them conceded that it was

Kottayam Incorporated

quite an achievement. But almost all of them said that it was not replicable as Kottayam was a highly advanced town compared with the other towns in the state. Another capable administrator, K.R. Rajan, who was the district collector, Ernakulam did not think so; he took up the literacy campaign for the whole district. He did a remarkably good job and Ernakulam became the first district in the country to become fully literate

K.R. Rajan had tremendous abilities to come up with innovative schemes. He was not a direct recruit IAS officer. He was not known to be a firebrand. He was not even a good orator. But he put together a campaign which inspired thousands of men to work for him. Eventually Kottayam district became the district with the highest literacy rate in the world 99.6 percent. We beat Ernakulam by a clear 8 percent margin. When Kottayam became the district with the highest literacy in the country, most bureaucrats said that Kerala was far too advanced for the rest of the country and it would not be possible to replicate the model elsewhere. Bureaucrats seem to be looking for excuses perpetually. Therefore, there are always the standard and convincing arguments that what was done at Kottayam or Ernakulam is not replicable. They argued that conditions were different. Conditions are always different and therefore we just do not try; some try half-heartedly. When they fail, they say 'I told you so'. A great deal of mental strength as well as time and effort are needed to implement a programme of this sort. Most bureaucrats have neither the inclination nor the will for such an effort. There are, of course, remarkably committed bureaucrats who have taken on the challenge and succeeded remarkably well. There was Aditi Mehta who was district collector of Ajmer, in Rajasthan, which was one of the most backward districts in the country. Literacy rate in the district was less than 30 percent and literacy among women was less than 5 percent. She launched a literacy campaign and made the district fully literate over a period of two years. Such incredible success stories are there. But they are far too few.

Making a Difference

Why is it that some of the men and women who go through the gates of the National Academy of Administration have fire in them and succeed dramatically well while others just give up? True, it is difficult to succeed in our country, but there has to be more than that to it. There has to be an answer if meaningful things have to be done in this country.

Rajiv Gandhi came to Kottayam on an election campaign ten days before his tragic end at Sriperumbudur. Three days before Rajiv Gandhi came to address the public meeting, there were newspaper reports that he was going to be at Kottayam. I had received no information either from the Centre or from the state government that Rajiv Gandhi was coming, even though he was in Z+ category for security. As the district magistrate I was supposed to be in charge of law and order and security. I rang up my superintendent of police and enquired whether he had received any communication from anybody regarding Rajiv Gandhi's security. He said no. There was absolutely no information at all. We decided that we would take the initiative to organise the security. The day before his arrival I checked up again with my office whether there was any direction from the government regarding Rajiv Gandhi's security. I checked up also with the superintendent again. He also had no directions or information. We went ahead and provided the best we could. The helipad was just behind the collectorate compound. I watched him from a window as he got down from the helicopter. He was driven off in a jeep to the town. I was glad that he was safe.

I used to admire him when he had taken over as Prime Minister. He had floored the world on his first trip to the United States. I had thought that here was a young man who could at last bring back hope to the country. He was an innocent man who got swallowed by the

Kottayam Incorporated

big sharks. By 1991, he had done a lot of introspection. He was bubbling with enthusiasm to rectify the mistakes and go ahead. Once again I felt hope. We needed someone young, but not necessarily innocent. In the evening when I watched him again take off in the helicopter on his return journey, I was greatly relieved. Ten days later the superintendent of police woke me up in the middle of the night and gave me the stunning news that Rajiv Gandhi had been killed in a bomb explosion. We put all our police force on the streets. We did not want to have any trouble in the district.

I felt very bad for Rajiv. He died because of the sheer inefficiency of the men who were supposed to protect him—not those guarding him but those who took the decisions, who prepared the security plan for Rajiv Gandhi and supervised the security operations. For all the big noise we make about VIP security, in actual fact the arrangements are so sloppy that the VIPs are most insecure; as usual we do a shoddy job.

What else did I do as collector? We had a great time.

At weekends we went for boat rides in the backwaters with fishing rods and nets. Sometimes I went to my village, Manimala, 35 km from the headquarters. The kids loved the river. They would spend hours together in the river. Manimala river has absolutely pure water. It also has a lot of fish. My kids and I would sit on the rocks and dangle the fishing lines, waiting for the big catch. The big catch never came. Every time I caught a small fish my kids would pull it off the hook and throw it back into the river. The fun was in catching and not in hurting, they told me. I learned to throw the fishing net pretty well. I managed to catch a good many fish with it. In the backwaters they were good sized ones. We would have lots of cooked tapioca and fish on these outings. It's a great combination. It gives you all that you need for staying healthy. We also had good friends on these trips.

I did a lot of interesting things around the house. I had the best residential bungalow in Kerala. It had been built a hundred years ago

Making a Difference

in splendid style. It was set in five sprawling acres of land. It was jungle when I took over. I cleared the area. I cleared three acres and built a beautiful garden there, with a small swimming pool in the middle. In six months, the garden was a riot of colour. I planted most of the plants myself, and watered them every day. In the middle of the swimming pool I had a small outhouse. I had water falling from the outhouse roof into the swimming pool at night. I would sit there late at night and dream of things, listening to the sound of water falling into the swimming pool. I cleared the balance two acres of land and converted it into a very productive vegetable garden. I produced enough vegetables for the entire colony. Picking the vegetables was my privilege. Nobody else was allowed to do it. They were the product of my hard labour. We sent basketfuls of vegetables to all the neighbours. We had beans, bitter gourds, lady's fingers. My flowers and vegetables were my big happiness. I would work every day in the garden at least for half an hour in the morning, before the visitors came. My wife and kids spent most of the time there. Both my sons were full-fledged greens. My younger son, Adarsh, who was just four when we came to Kottayam, banned smoking in my house. One day when my wife and I were out, my younger brother came down from Munnar. He worked in the tea gardens. He took out a cigarette and lit it. Adarsh told him, 'Don't destroy my ozone.' My brother was quite startled. He didn't smoke for the rest of the evening. On weekends we were out with our kids most of the time. My elder son, Akash, always ordered the car to stop any time he saw trees being cut. They expected me to arrest anybody who cut a tree. Sometimes I could not, because they were cutting trees legitimately. Even in Delhi my kids expect me to arrest anybody who touches a tree. I tell them that I have no more powers to arrest anyone. They are unhappy with the answer.

6. Exiled

Beyond a certain period, one tends to develop various personal interests in a place. I had done my bit. The Left Front government had done an excellent job. When I had completed three years as district collector, I requested the government to shift me out. There was a new government, led by the Congress, in place by this time. My request was turned down; instead I was asked to continue at least for another year. I insisted on a transfer, but without success.

The post of vice-chancellor at Mahatma Gandhi University fell vacant in the meanwhile. I was sounded out for it and immediately agreed. I love teaching. I used to spend a good bit of time speaking to students in schools and colleges as collector. In fact there were few schools where I had not gone. These visits were basically opportunities for me to put dreams into people. Schools and colleges, I believed, were the institutions which could transform youngsters into people with commitment. If they could not dream while in college they would never reach anywhere. When I spoke to them, then, it was with a purpose: to imbue them with a spirit of accomplishment, inspire them to take on the world. Limitations exist only in the mind, I would tell them. Anybody with a dream could achieve whatever it was he wanted. I generally spoke for two hours, and they always listened with rapt attention—even when it was

Making a Difference

primary school children! I do not know how many of them followed up on what I said and learnt to dream. I like to think I helped pull a few out of mediocrity, that some were inspired to set their lives on a course which would alter the destiny of the nation. I was thrilled, therefore to receive the offer, and proud too. At thirty-eight, I had to be one of the youngest vice-chancellors anywhere.

But I had not reckoned with the palmolein deal. I was ex-officio director on the board of the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (KSCSC). The corporation has a network of stores spread all over the state, including 2,000 outlets supplying essential commodities. Its turnover at the time was more than five hundred crores a year. It was possibly the biggest public sector undertaking in the state. It had, too, the monopoly for import of edible oils into the state.

Keralites traditionally use only coconut oil for cooking. They also use a lot of it on their heads, which might explain why their hair is so black and curly, and why you hardly see any balding Keralites. My father, at the age of eighty-two, has jet-black hair. I, at forty-two, have almost no hair because I do not use coconut oil! Keralites are also known to be brainy; the oil may account for this as well!

Now, however, coconut trees have given way to rubber plants all over Kerala, especially in its southern heartland, which was full of them for many centuries. Eighty per cent of the rubber produced in India comes from Kerala. Nobody plants coconut any more except in the coastal region near Trivandrum, and there is, as a result, an acute shortage of coconut oil in the state. Keralites, however, are very adaptable. They have, learnt to accept other edible oils. In fact Keralites are the most adaptable people in the whole world. From the Isle of Man (operating offshore accounts for you know whom) to the Ivory Coast, anywhere you go, you will always find a Keralite, happy wherever he is. He will still love coconut oil. But if he cannot get it he won't crib. Palmolein, which is abundantly produced in Malaysia, is the favourite substitute for it. The state has been importing

Exiled

ilmolein for the past twenty years to make good the shortage of edible oils. Keralites have begun to like palmolein. So have politicians, but for other reasons.

When I was the ex-officio director, 15,000 tonnes of palmolein were imported. The deal was struck in Singapore by some political advisers to the ministers concerned. After this, it was placed before the KSCSC for ratification. The board members were not consulted before the deal was finalised. I wrote to the company that I would not ratify the deal as I felt that there was no transparency involved in the negotiation. I suspected that it was not a straight deal and that a great deal of money had changed hands.

The comptroller and auditor general of India(CAG) in his report for the year ended 31 March 1993 has examined the irregularity and impropriety of the transaction. Based on this report a criminal case was filed before the deputy superintendent of police (vigilance), Trivandrum by V. Vijayakumar against K.Karunakaran, chief minister, Kerala, (ii) S. Padmakumar, formerly chief secretary, Kerala, (iii) Directors of Power and Energy Pvt. Ltd., Singapore, (iv) Director of Mala Export Corporation at Madras, and (v) Persons whose names were not known and who acted as representatives of accused (iii) and (iv). I quote from the FIR filed before the police:

In para 2B3.11 of the CAG report major irregularities were noticed in the matter of import of Palmolein under 'Rupees Clearance Scheme'. The said report disclosed the involvement of the accused in the commission of the offences of accepting kickbacks. The report mentions the following:

* No.1 (commercial, government of Kerala), submitted to the state government for presentation to the legislature under Section 19A of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Duties, Powers and Responsibility of the State under Article 151[2] of the Constitution of India).

Making a Difference

'8. 2B 3.11 Import of Palmolein under 'Rupees Clearance Scheme'.

(i) On 6 November 1991, the government of India circulated detailed guidelines in respect of a scheme framed by it for direct import of edible oils for public distribution system. The scheme, inter alia, contained the following stipulations:

The payment for the imported edible oil would be made in Indian rupees to be kept in an escrow account and utilised for the export of approved Indian goods so that there would not be any outgo of free foreign exchange. The price of imported oil would not be higher than the procurement price of STC or the average price paid by the STC in the preceding thirty days.

Based on a discussion it had with the chief minister at New Delhi, Power and Energy Pvt. Ltd., Singapore offered (9 November 1991) to supply the required quantity of palmolein under this scheme. On 18 November 1991 the state government intimated to the Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies that the immediate requirement of palmolein was 15,000 tonnes to meet in December 1991 and Sakranthi in the middle of January 1992 and that the company would act as its agent for the import of palmolein. It was also reported therein that the indicative price would be ascertained from STC and that the purchase price would not exceed that indicative price on the day of concluding the purchase. The request of the state government was acceded to by the ministry on 26 November 1991 and the government of Kerala authorised the company to import 15,000 tonnes of palmolein through Power and Energy Pvt. Ltd., Singapore. As the council of ministers had already taken a firm decision on 27 November 1991 to buy the oil

Exiled

from Power and Energy Pvt. Ltd., the company did not invite tenders. It entered into an agreement with this firm on 29 November 1991 for the import of 15,000 tonnes of palmolein. It was also agreed to pay 15 per cent of the value of import as service charges to the firm. According to the agreement, the shipment was to be made during the period between December 1991 and February 1992 and the price was not to exceed the indicative price received by STC in India from its overseas officers in Singapore/Malaysia for the day on which the business was concluded between the buyer and seller. It was also stipulated in the agreement that the pricing and the shipment schedule was to be decided by buyer's option and the seller would accept the payment in Indian rupees at the exchange rate prevailing on the date of receipt of import documents as determined by the commercial bank handling the escrow account. Thus the terms of agreement in regard to the price were at variance from the approved scheme of government of India. The price should have been fixed on the date of conclusion

of business (29 November 1991)___ Government of India had stipulated that the oil should be imported by 31 December 1991 or firm letter of credit be opened by the date: the company fixed the delivery schedule as February-March 1992. Similarly though the c.i.f. price of palmolein in November 1991 was U.S. \$ 385 per tonne, the company fixed the price on 24 January 1992 at U.S. \$ 405 per tonne. The price of U.S. \$ 405 per tonne (Rs 10,554) at the exchange rate of U.S. \$ 3.8375 = Rs 100 was also far in excess of the price of Rs 9,796 fixed by STC in respect of the order placed by it on 5 December 1991. The price paid by Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation Ltd. in respect of import of palmolein based on the contract with the same supplier entered into on 21 November 1991 was also only

Making a Difference

U.S. \$392.5.

In respect of 14,921 tonnes of palmolein received during the period February-March 1992 against the contract, the company incurred the total cost of Rs.2,049.78 lakhs (cost of oil Rs 1,713.25 lakhs, servicing charges at the rate of 15 per cent to the supplier Rs.260.46 lakhs, and customs duty at the rate of 40 per cent Rs.676.07 lakhs). The fact that the rate prevailing in November 1991 was only between U.S.\$ 385 (on 9 November) and 392.5 (on 21 November) and the STC rate in December 1991 was Rs.9,796 only would indicate that the rate of U.S. \$ 405 (Rs. 10,554) per tonne paid by the company was very much on the higher side. Had the import been effected in December 1991 as stipulated by the government of India, the total expenditure would have been Rs.2,265.65 lakhs only based on the price of Rs.9,796 per tonne paid by STC in respect of orders placed by it on 5 December 1991.

In case the company had fixed the price in Indian rupees on firm basis on the date of agreement, the price would have been even less than the price of Rs 9,796 per tonne paid by STC and the extra expenditure of over Rs 382 lakhs could have been avoided.

Though the oil was intended for distribution through PDS during December 1991 and up to 15 January 1992, the material was received only during February-March 1992. Hence the purchase at higher rates did not serve the purpose for which it was intended.

The government stated (December 1992) that the price fixed was based on the base price on 24 January 1992 when the contract became operative after opening escrow account by the seller on 18 January 1992. The delay of nearly two months (29 November 1991 to 24 January 1992) in opening the escrow account after conclusion of the

Exiled

agreement was avoidable as the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation Ltd. could conclude the price at U.S. \$ 392.5 per tonne in the last week of December 1991 in respect of a contract entered into on 21 November 1991. Even if this date of 24 January 1992 is adopted, it was observed in audit that the rate fixed was far in excess of the rate of Rs 10,174 paid by STC on 6 January 1992 and prevailing within thirty days preceding that date. Reckoned at this rate of Rs 10,174 per tonne, the extra expenditure on the purchase of 14,921 tonnes of palmolein by the company at higher rate would work out to Rs 87 lakhs, (ii) The company entered into contract with Mala Export Corporation, Madras (an associate of the seller) in November 1991 without inviting competitive quotations for clearance and storage (in shore tanks up to thirty days) of palmolein at rate of Rs 300 per tonne. The company paid Rs 47.51 lakhs (including Rs 2.75 lakhs towards rent of tanks for the period of storage exceeding one month) to Mala Export Corporation on this account. The government stated (October 1993) that in view of urgency and the inexperience of the company in the matter of import the firm was awarded the handling contract without inviting quotations so as to have absolute co-ordination between the main supplier and the handling agent. This reply as to urgency and inexperience is not tenable as there was a time lag of over two months between the date of entering into the contract (29 November 1991) and the stipulated delivery schedule (February-March 1992) and as the company had on earlier occasions the experience in the import of other commodities, (iii) Though the state government stated in October 1993 that there were no complaints from the consumers as to the quality of the oil, it was observed in audit that the following

Making a Difference

two stipulations in the standard agreements of STC were omitted in the agreement:

- a) Oil to be free from solid particles, adulterants, sediments, suspended and other foreign matters, separate water and added colouring or flavouring substances.
- b) Material to be free from mineral oil, toxic matter or any other oil of vegetable or animal origin.

Further against as many as nineteen parameters stipulated in the standard agreements of STC in respect of RBD palmolein, only seven parameters as to quality were specified in the agreement.

Out of the parameters so omitted, two parameters, viz. refractive index at 4°C and cloud point (maximum), are specifically mentioned in the Prevention of Food Adulteration Rules 1956 (PFA rules) as two standards for palmolein. Therefore, the agreement entered into did not contain adequate safeguards to ensure that the imported produce would satisfy all these standards laid down in the PFA rules.

These findings of the CAG are factual in nature and are those which are evident from a scrutiny of the files. CAG does not go into transactions in the way a police investigation would do. He does not go into the criminal nature of the transaction and enquire whether a cognizable offence has been committed and whether it is the result of a criminal conspiracy. Even where these are self-evident the CAG avoids spelling out these aspects and leaves the facts to speak.

The contents of the government file No:10028/C2/91 F&CSD relating to the import of palmolein give a tell-tale evidence regarding the involvement of accused Nos. 1 to 3 in the aforesaid transaction which would lead to the irresistible conclusion that they have committed corruption

Exiled

under section 13(1) (c) & (d) and also committed offences under Sec.406,409,420 and 120 B and 201 of the IPC and caused huge loss to the tune of Rs.6.5 crores to the government and its agent the Civil Supplies Corporation. It is seen from the files produced before the Kerala State Assembly that very important pieces of evidence implicating the accused 1 to 3 with the commission of offences were surreptitiously removed in order to screen the offenders. Thus there is clinching evidence that accused 1 to 3 have committed offence under section 201 of the IPC also.

On 26.11.91 the managing director noted in the file, 'As Government of Kerala have already decided to appoint M/s Power & Energy Co.(P) Ltd. to act as our agent for supplying palmolein, we have to enter into an agreement with this firm.' This clearly indicates that there was a pre-planned conspiracy to enter into an agreement with P&E Co. and Mala Export Corporation. The managing director had no choice. Mr Zakaria Mathew who was an additional chief secretary and chairman of KSCSC tried to justify his not calling for quotations and his not making adequate enquiry about the credentials of the P&E Co. on grounds of urgency. He advanced two reasons for going ahead with the P&E Co. (i) Great relief for the people of Kerala who have been clamouring for the palmolein; and (ii) Substantial profit to the Civil Supplies Corporation. Regarding pricing the chief secretary wrote on file as follows:

'We may do what other governments like Tamil Nadu are doing.'

Pricing was not as per the guidelines issued by the government of India.

I further quote from the FIR:

On 2.12.91 the secretary (F&CSD) issued the CO., sanctioning import through the Power & Energy Company (Ext.P). This accords sanction to the KSCSC for the import of 15,000 metric tonnes of palmolein using M/s P&E Pvt. Ltd, Singapore as the intermediary as per the conditions laid down by the government of India in their letter of 6 November.

The secretary issued this G.O. fully knowing that the cabinet approval was not with reference to the guidelines dated 6.11.91 and it was this cabinet approval which was apparently orally communicated to the managing director before he signed the contract on 29th. The secretary issued the G.O. with this wording to safeguard his position on paper and this was part of the conspiracy as this G.O. was not to be followed in practice.

Each government official while individually furthering the objective of the conspiracy to defraud the government and the people of Kerala also tried to safeguard their personal interest. It is this dual approach which has helped in unravelling the conspiracy.

The CAG report and the files mentioned above would also disclose the following:

- a) Even before getting government orders, Civil Supplies Corporation entered into an agreement with P&E company.
- b) The price of the palmolein imported was fixed in violation of government of India conditions and thereby caused huge loss to the government of Kerala.
- c) In the mode of payment also the government of India directions were violated in order to give undue benefits to accused 3 & 4.
- d) In fixing the price by giving an enhanced rate and by changing the mode of payment the corporation has suffered huge loss of Rs 381.13 lakhs.

Exiled

e) Though there was sufficient time no competitive tenders were invited for importing palmolein and to transport the same.

The points raised by the CAG point to a deep-seated conspiracy by some members of the cabinet and some bureaucrats hand in glove with some private companies. The state suffered a loss of about Rs.6.5 crores. People in Delhi have a big laugh when told about the sums involved: they are too small. In Delhi, the deals run into hundreds of crores.

There are certain facts about the case which are typical of decision-making in this country. First, that ministers took the initiative for a commercial purchase by a public sector company. There was no reason for the chief minister or any other minister to be directly involved with the negotiations. In this case more than one minister helped put through the deal. This was improper but it is happening in this country all the time. From purchase of salt to safety pins to missiles, it is the ministers who take the decision. It is a shame, and runs counter to the principles of a parliamentary democracy.

Secondly, we see bureaucrats bending backwards to implement directions which are irregular and even illegal. The chief secretary, S. Padmakumar, was a brilliant man, and as a bureaucrat he was much sharper than any other bureaucrat. He could be ruthlessly efficient, but the efficiency was misdirected. He was the chief adviser to the chief minister during his tenure on all matters, official and non-official.

Then, of course, there was Zakaria Mathew, the additional chief secretary; he was also the chairman of the KSCSC. He was a batchmate of Padmakumar in the service. Zakaria Mathew was straight. He never made a rupee for himself all his life through any dishonest means. But he allowed himself to be led by politicians and superiors. With Karunakaran as chief minister and Padmakumar as chief secretary, this meant that no questions were to be asked.

Making a Difference

Padmakumar had the reputation of destroying people and nobody dared disobey him. Zakaria Mathew ensured that the instructions of the bosses were followed. Jiji Thomson, the managing director of the corporation, was no fool. He put down everything on paper; that was the only reason why the CAG was able to come out with the facts of the case and indict the people concerned. He was honest to the core and was determined that the deal should be brought to light. It was brought to light eventually. But by then the damage had already been done to the state exchequer.

The IAS has plenty of officers like Zakaria Mathew. They are bright, hard working and honest. They have a conscience. Since they do not make any money for themselves, their conscience is clean. Yet they do not fulfil their promise because they do not take on the politician. Chief ministers and cabinet ministers everywhere wield such authority that bureaucrats are scared of even their shadows. Bureaucrats, from senior IAS officers to everybody else below them fall in line. Many of these bureaucrats are honest. But they have no guts; they have no guts to say no to an irregular decision. This is the tragedy of the Indian bureaucracy. This is the tragedy of Indian administration at its worst. Honest officers who do not make money and are well intentioned, totally falling in line and obeying commands which are totally irregular. I believe that over fifty per cent of officers in the IAS are honest, but less than one per cent have guts. It is not only that they pass on directions from the top, they are also pretty happy to advise the politicians on how to make a quick buck. Not all of them, only some.

The police refused to register the first information report filed with the vigilance department of the police by Vijayakumar. After all, how could the police department register a case against the chief minister? The high court was approached for issuing directions to register the FIR. The high court refused to intervene.

The chief minister criticised the accountant general of Kerala for bringing out the report indicting him. He said the accountant

Exiled

general was politically motivated. The accountant general, James Joseph, was a fearless man; very few accountant generals would have dared to write the kind of report he did. I have drawn heavily from the report of the accountant general because it is an authoritative report. It is learnt that most of the files on the palmolein scandal have been tampered with, both in the Food and Civil Supplies Department and in the Civil Supplies Corporation. The public may never get to know what really happened. The police, even if it investigates the case now, may not find much evidence because the bureaucracy is extremely good at tampering with papers. They would have redone the complete file, right from page one if there was anything in the original file which went against them.

After I informed them that I would not ratify the action of the government, my name was struck off the list of people who were being short listed for the job of vice-chancellor. I was pretty sad because I would have loved the job. I could have transformed the university into a place which would create people who could transform the country.

In December 1991, I received an order from the chief secretary that I was being posted as commissioner, Delhi Development Authority. I had not put down an option to go on deputation to the government. IAS officers are not inducted on deputation by the Central government unless the officer concerned has given his written concurrence to go on deputation. I rang up Dandapani, secretary in the Department of Personnel. I had worked with him earlier. I told him that the order could not be for me as I had never opted for Delhi. He told me that there was no other Alphonso in the service and it could only be me. He said he would get back to me. He rang up after half an hour to inform that Cecil Noronha, who was the vice-chairman, DDA had asked for me by name because they wanted somebody from outside Delhi to take on the builders' mafia there. The chief secretary, Mr Padmakumar, was asked whether my services could be spared. He was duty bound to ask me whether I was

Making a Difference

willing to go, but he did not. He told them that it would be a great pleasure for the state to lend my services to the Centre. This was right in the middle of the palmolein deal. I decided that I would not go to Delhi because my children were too small to withstand the pollution in Delhi. I informed the Central government about my decision. They said that they would ban me for five years from coming to Delhi if I did not come there now. I could have gone to the high court and challenged the order. But I decided to move on. I packed up and left to an uncertain future. I felt like an exile.

7. Rudra, the Destroyer

I took the Cochin-Delhi flight and landed in the capital on 23 February 1992. I checked in at Kerala House on arrival. On opening the suitcase I found that my only valuable earthly possession, a bundle of hundred-rupee notes totalling Rs.10,000, was missing from my suitcase.

I promptly rang up the Indian Airlines office and informed them about the missing money. They said it could not have been lost at Delhi airport, it must have been lost at Cochin. I sent a fax message to the commissioner of police, Trivandrum, informing him about the theft and requesting him to take appropriate action. The police commissioner, Rajivan, an outstanding officer, had been at Kottayam as superintendent of police while I was there; he promptly raided the airport. The airline and airport staff immediately went on strike. No flight could take off for the rest of the day. I was informed that the money could not be recovered. How could Rs. 10,000 be recovered when thousands of crores of stolen money cannot be traced to any place in this country?

Next day I tried to get an appointment with the chairman of Indian Airlines. He was not available for the next three days. On the fourth day, I sought an appointment with Madhav Rao Scindia, the minister for civil aviation. I got a prompt appointment and met him

Making a Difference

the next day. I told him about what had happened. He said he was not the minister for Indian Airlines and could not issue any directions to the airline. I told him that I was a bureaucrat who had spent thirteen years in the government and I knew how public sector undertakings functioned. I knew that ministers were not supposed to be running public sector undertakings under their ministry—they were supposed to be autonomous—but that was how it was in reality. He reiterated that he was not the minister for Indian Airlines. I told him that Rs. 10,000 may not be big money for the LA but it was a big sum for me. I would do everything to get my money back. I told him that I would take on the airline. I would write about it. He suggested finally that I should meet the IA chairman and he might have a solution.

I was not very positive when I came away. However, I managed to get an appointment with the chairman the very next day after a reference to the minister. I told him what had happened. He told me that the minister had spoken to him already and that I could have my money. I got the money the very next day, thanks to the minister. He did not make much noise, but he delivered.

I was advised by my friends that Delhi was not Kerala. I should be careful. I had got away with a lot in Kerala but this was the citadel of power. Everybody is politically connected; you cannot touch anybody, I was told. I was exiled from Kerala and I had to hold my job in Delhi, they said. I said, 'Fine, let me have a feel of the place.'

The first few months I did nothing very spectacular. One day when I walked into the room of the vice-chairman, he was discussing terms with representatives of the Tata Consultancy Services for working out a pricing formula for DDA land. The contract had been almost finalised when I walked in. I sat through the negotiations for ten minutes. Then I asked Mr Noronha if I could have a word with him. He took me aside and asked what was so urgent. I told him that I might be able to work out a formula without assistance from any outside agency. He asked me whether I had done such an exercise before. I said, 'No, but I have done cost-benefit analysis in college

for my post-graduation in economics.' He was not very impressed but told the consultancy firm that he would get back to them within a couple of days for finalisation of the contract. I prepared a concept paper the very next day which was presented to the senior officers. The paper was accepted. The vice-chairman was still fairly sceptical, but he said that I could develop on it. I asked Datta, the computer man in the DDA, to help me. Over the next one month Mr Datta and I sat before a PC and came out with a report in thirty-seven pages. I used most of what I had learnt in college, including the conservative discounted cash flow method. I also deviated a little bit here and there and added my own inputs to the formula. It was a complex calculation with millions of permutations which could only have been worked out on the computer. But at the same time the basics of the formula were very simple which anybody could understand. The report was presented within a month. It was discussed and accepted by the authority and by the ministry; government orders were issued fixing land prices of DDA based on my formula. The computer people called it the 'Alphonso formula'.

Quite a few Ph.D. scholars from Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University have used it for their theses. My predecessor in DDA, Rakesh Behari, used it for his MBA project report.

Cooperative societies challenged the price fixation formula in the high court. The high court lawyers were on strike when the case came up for hearing before Justice B. N. Kirpal. I along with Kewal Sharma, commissioner (housing), DDA argued the case personally before Justice B. N. Kirpal for two weeks. We were the star attractions in the court, arguing for three hours every day. The court used to be packed with lawyers. They would not argue the case but they were all very keen about the outcome. If the court struck down the formula, the DDA would lose an enormous amount of money running into hundreds of crores in a single project alone. Added up for all the projects, it could be a few thousand crores. Therefore, we

Making a Difference

were dead serious about the case. At the end of continuous hearing for two weeks, the judge issued an eighty-page judgement upholding the price fixation formula. While delivering the judgement, Justice Kirpal said: 'You have done a good job, better than any high court advocate. You should start practising.'

'I don't have a gown, your lordship,' I retorted.

'Take my gown,' he said.

'I do not have a law degree, your lordship,' I went on.

'Get one,' he told me.

I decided to enrol in the law course in Delhi University. I should be a qualified advocate by the middle of 1996. I will not have a problem finding another job if I get chucked out of this one. I will be able to fight my own case. Justice B. N. Kirpal is now a judge of the Supreme Court. For a short while he went to Gujarat as chief justice of the Gujarat High Court.

The high court judgement was challenged in the Supreme Court. The division bench in the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the high court. My formula was accepted for all other projects of the DDA also. It is today the official land price fixation formula for the DDA. The vice-chairman promised me a good service entry and a fat cash award after the high court victory. He forgot about it later. He also told me that he was asking the lieutenant governor, who was chairman of the DDA, to issue me a special commendation letter for outstanding work. But it never came. I never asked them about it either.

A few months into my job, I decided that it was time to get my act together. I was watching how precious DDA land was being grabbed by anybody who walked onto it. The DDA owns about 80,000 acres of land in Delhi. It has under its jurisdiction another 100,000 acres under development controls. It has thus a total monopoly on land ownership and land development in Delhi, and it has all the worst aspects of a monopoly: it is corrupt and inefficient. When I joined it, the staff was hand in glove with the encroachers.

Rudra, the Destroyer

The DDA had 35,000 employees on its rolls in 1992. Most of the employees who had been in any kind of public dealing assignment were millionaires. Anybody could walk onto DDA land one fine morning and set up a structure; he could sell it for a fortune overnight and disappear. The builders made quick money. The buyers got properties at a great discount. Everything was done under the patronage of politicians, ruling and opposition, who made a fortune. Everybody was happy except that public land was being eaten away by land sharks. I decided that the only way to deal with the problem was to strike at the most powerful and the best connected men in town so that the message would be clear that nobody could get away because of power and influence. If I could strike at them, the less powerful and petty criminals would know that they would not be able to get away. Therefore, I prepared a list of the most powerful encroachers in town. I decided to strike at them.

Our first strike was at a seven-storied temple across the river from the Inter-State Bus Terminus which illegally occupied twenty-three acres of land. A powerful politician who had also been a Union home minister was said to have an interest in it. I inspected the site secretly along with Deepak Mishra, the deputy commissioner of police of the area. Deepak Mishra was a firebrand. He was a gutsy little fellow who could take on a platoon of gangsters anytime, anywhere. He was a very straight guy. We drew up an operational plan which would be executed after three days. We struck at 2 o'clock in the morning. We gathered at a far off police station and nobody from the DDA or the police, other than Mishra and myself, knew where we were going to strike. We drove in a convoy with six bulldozers, men from the Land Protection Branch of the DDA, and a large contingent of policemen to cover us. Past midnight the traffic on the entire road was diverted. We drove about ten kilometres and reached the site. The bulldozers promptly got into action. Over the next six hours we reduced the structure to rubble. We were told that Mauni Baba, who was the chief priest of the temple, could survive

Making a Difference

in water. He had a small temple on the river bed. In the last floods, it was rumoured that he had continued to sit cross-legged for three days even when the temple was totally submerged under water. We took a precaution as the river was nearby and there was also a deep pond in front of the temple. When we went to demolish, he could escape into the pond and disappear. We would be in trouble. We hired some naval divers to accompany us on our operation so that in case Mauni Baba dived into the pond, we would be able to nab him. We did such meticulous planning! By the time the politician reached the site at 8 the next morning, the seven-storied temple had vanished into thin air. We had already left the site after a hard night's work. He could not arrive earlier because there was some problem with the latch on his door. Mysterious things seem to happen to telephones and latches when we carry out demolitions. Who says the gods don't work their magic anymore?

The operation had been carried out too late for the newspapers to report it the next day. But the day after it was headline news in all the papers. The politician was furious. He met the Prime Minister. How could a bureaucrat from the south take on the might of his power in Delhi? How could he dare to demolish a religious structure which, even if illegal, could not be touched in this country? I have no idea what the Prime Minister told him. The media promptly hitched on to me and I was a hero overnight. They had found an interesting topic to write about. Over the next one week, the press carried interviews with me on what prompted me to take on such a powerful man and what would be my plan of action for the future. I told them that I wanted the law of the land to be enforced in the capital of the country, irrespective of who was powerful and rich. I had nothing against the rich and the powerful. I only wanted the law of the land to be adhered to. The message got around the city that you could not get away with breaking the law by grabbing public land.

My next target was one of the most influential men in the Congress, chief of the party in Delhi and also a Union minister for a

Rudra, the Destroyer

long time. Following allegations of involvement in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, he is protected by black cat commandos.

The Congress chief's son was running an automobile showroom in a 'small commercial complex': the small complex was just two lakh square feet of built-up area. The building was inaugurated by Rajiv Gandhi when he was Prime Minister. We arrived at the building with five bulldozers and hundreds of men. We gave them one hour's time to move out of the building. There were about fifty other establishments also in the complex other than the automobile showroom. Most of them did not take us seriously. Many tried to ring up politicians. The Congress chief got the political secretary to the Prime Minister to ring me up at the showroom. I did not take the call. I said that I did not take calls when I was in the field. Anybody can call me when I am in the office; but I do not take calls in the field even if they are from my boss. I have also instructed my subordinates not to take a call even from me when they are out on demolition operations. I never call them. Even if I call them, they are not supposed to take the call; if anybody does, he will lose his job.

After an hour, the bulldozers moved in and started knocking down the structure. It was a very difficult operation as it was a four-storied building built on a large plot. When we started demolishing the building, people started moving out. Finally it began to register that we meant business.

We managed to pull down the main part of the building by lunch time. The operation went on till late in the night. I stood there from morning till midnight. In all big operations, I make it a point to be present. This is to ensure that under no circumstances is the demolition stopped. Even if any court order is brought to the site, I can read it for myself, instead of accepting whatever the advocate demands. In most cases, the court orders arrive after demolition work has started. The courts are very prompt in issuing stay orders against the government. I have a total of about 20,000 cases in various courts, most of them stay orders against demolition and dispossession. In the

Making a Difference

beginning I also took along my Great Dane Spanny when I went for demolitions. The newspapers started calling him the new DDA legal expert. His bite was better than his bark. Both of us bite; but my bark is better than my bite. My dog became a celebrity. There were cartoons on him in some newspapers. I showed them to my dog; he was amused.

We completed the operation by midnight. The next day it was the lead story in most of the newspapers. The Congress chief denied that he had anything to do with the building. He rang me up the next day and told me that he had nothing to do with it. I told him that I was glad to learn that; it would have been very embarrassing for me to have demolished a building belonging to a national leader.

Next we moved to Vasant Kunj, a posh residential area being developed by the DDA. There was a huge shopping centre coming up on the main Mehrauli-airport road. It had over a hundred large rooms. I called for a report from my zonal officer on receiving the information. After investigation, he told me that it was on private land. There was nothing I could do. A week later I got an anonymous call telling me that the shopping complex was, in fact, on DDA land. I asked the caller for proof; he said that the builder was claiming that the complex site fell in survey no.408 while it was actually in survey no.430. I asked the revenue authorities under the deputy commissioner to survey and demarcate the land. The tehsildar of the area gave me a report stating that the land in question was actually in survey no.408. Here was the authentic report which proved that it was actually on private land. When there was no action for another week, the anonymous caller again rang up. He told me that the result of the demarcation done by the tehsildar was a fraud and he had proof that it was in survey no.430. I asked him to see me. Reluctantly he met me, and I took all the papers. I wrote a letter to the deputy commissioner, Delhi, who was my batchmate, to depute his additional district magistrate to do the demarcation. I went with the ADM and my revenue staff for the demarcation. We went around for

Rudra, the Destroyer

the next eight hours measuring the land from the pillars on the boundaries of the village. By late in the night we had a demarcation report signed by the ADM, three tehsildars and my deputy directors. It proved conclusively that the land was in survey no.430.

The unauthorised builder had done his homework very well before he started the construction. He created revenue records to prove that this land was in survey no.408. After he created the records he got them incorporated in the revenue records at the village level and the taluk level. With these authentic records he approached the civil court and got a stay against dispossession of the property and demolition of the structures. Actually the land was totally bare. But the builder filed a building plan in the court which showed the existence of a shopping complex with over one hundred shops. The court did not check whether the complex existed and promptly granted stay against demolition.

Once he had the stay order, he went ahead with the construction. He did not have a sanctioned plan. The building controls in the area were under the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Presumably people from the various overseeing authorities, ranging from the MCD and DDA to the police, allowed him to proceed out of the kindness of their hearts. By the time the ground floor was completed, he had already sold off almost all the shops in all the three floors.

The modus operandi of such builders is to lay the foundation, display the building plan of the proposed shopping complex, and put in an advertisement in the newspapers inviting buyers. There is an acute shortage of commercial and residential space in Delhi, thanks to the efficiency of the DDA. Thousands of people rush to the sellers when any such offer comes in the newspapers. It is specially attractive for the buyers as the builders sell at a discount, eager to collect their money and get away from the scene before anybody catches them.

The builders make crores on a paltry investment, the buyers get prime properties at great discount. The officers in the enforcement

Making a Difference

agencies make a fortune themselves. The political patrons get their share. This may have happened in this case also. In any event, by the time I had completed my second demarcation, the ground floor had already been completed and sold out. The first floor was under construction.

The second day after the final demarcation, I moved in with police protection. The station house officer, one Kaushik, delayed providing us police protection. I had to finally ring up the DCP, Ranjit Narayan, who told the SHO to provide the police force immediately. We started the operation at noon. Six of my bulldozers got into action. After an hour, the SHO came to me with a paper and demanded that I sign it; it was a stay order. It was from the same court which had issued the earlier stay order just a few months back. The SHO promptly withdrew the police force. I told him that I would go ahead with the demolition regardless and if anything happened to the DDA staff, the responsibility for it would lie with him. He said that he did not care and ordered the bulldozer drivers to pull back. When one of them refused, the SHO pulled him down. Even though the stay order was not to be served through messenger, the SHO very keenly accepted the stay order. I telephoned Narayan immediately. I told him that his SHO was in league with the builders and should be taken off the operation. Ranjit Narayan immediately sent a senior officer, Additional DCP Malik. Kaushik was called back.

I read the stay order. It stated that demolition of any structure from survey no.408 was stayed. I told the advocate to the builder that since the building was not in survey no.408, the stay order was not applicable to this particular building. If the property number was wrong, the stay did not apply to that property. I got the bulldozers into operation again. By midnight we had pulled down the entire structure. The residents kept on coming up to me to say that it was a heroic action to have taken on such a powerful builder. Even though they needed a shopping complex in the area, they were very thrilled

Rudra, the Destroyer

that the land mafia had been fixed for good. I had won over Vasant Kunj.

We pulled down hundreds of structures in the Vasant Kunj area over the next few months. Some of these people had created records of land ownership. Most of them did not even bother to do that. They just walked onto DDA land, put up structures and sold them. Some did not even bother to get stay orders. Most of them bribed the lower functionaries of the DDA; by the time the structures were noticed, the builders would have already sold them off and it would be the buyers who had to pay the price. I had no sympathy for such 'innocent buyers'—they knew that these buildings were unauthorised and illegal, they had bought them because they were available cheap. Most of them also believed that since the builders had political patronage, nothing would happen to them. Unfortunately, we proved their notion wrong.

One of the big structures we demolished in Vasant Kunj was a department store belonging to a senior IAS officer. The owner claimed it to be the biggest such store in south Delhi. It was said to have been built by the officer in his magnanimity to his mistress who was his stenographer. I apologise for not being able to understand the intricacies of such romance.

An unauthorised colony came up over nearly a thousand acres in Ruchi Vihar next to Vasant Kunj. Many politicians and senior bureaucrats bought plots in this colony. The coloniser had a lot of clout. The colony was named after his daughter. What a tribute to his innocent daughter! It is not there any more. I am sorry. One day I moved in with my bulldozers, and over the next one week we pulled down everything on that one thousand acres. Over the next one month there were people driving into Ruchi Vihar from far off to see the effects of the action. They were not property dealers or persons who had owned land here. They were just people curious to see the devastation.

I spent a whole week in Ruchi Vihar out in the sun ensuring that

Making a Difference

everything was pulled down. The day we started the demolition, property prices in the area went down by half. In the same week we struck at two other illegal colonies. There were 119 farm houses on the National Highway, opposite the international airport. The who's who of India's corporate sector owned farm houses there. Most of these farm houses had sanctioned plans. The sanction was for a maximum of 1,076 sq. ft. of built up area in two-and-a-half acres of land. In reality they had built-up area in excess of 5,000 sq. ft. In some it was as high as 25,000 sq. ft. Some of these bungalows could beat anything in Hollywood, and their value would have been astronomical. These farm houses were not on DDA land but on private land, in a development area. In a development area the DDA has to issue show cause notice, hear the party and only then it can issue demolition orders. When I inspected the area we had not yet issued the show cause notices, so we ended up demolishing only the approach road to the colony. We dug it up ten feet deep with the bulldozers. There was a grand lunch party going on in one of the houses and the invitees, diplomats among them, had to walk over half a kilometre. I felt bad that I had spoiled their party. I told them so. I provided a little pathway for one-way traffic; they were happy.

I took a round of most of the houses of the colony and by the time I was winding up it was already evening. DDA officials are allowed to enter compounds for detection of any unauthorised structures. We were stopped at the gate of one of the houses which was being occupied by the chief of a multinational company in India. He had half a dozen guards at the gate, most of whom looked like boxers, six feet tall, hundred kilogram types. When we asked them to open the gate, they refused. Their leader said he would not allow anybody to go inside. I showed him my identity card, but he would not budge. I had some policemen with me. I asked the police to pick up the biggest guy among these boxers. He was arrested and taken to the police station. The multinational chief took up the issue with the American Embassy and the External Affairs Ministry. I was told in

Rudra, the Destroyer

no uncertain terms by a friend of mine who was close to the embassy that I had picked on the wrong man. He felt I should ring up the police and ask them to let him go. I was also asked to ring up the embassy and apologise. There were no calls from any of my superiors. I told my friends who called that I did not hold the white-skinned man in awe. I told them that there was a law in the land which had to be adhered to by everybody. If someone chose to live in this country, he had to obey the law. I also reminded them that if an Indian committed an offence in the United States, he would be promptly picked up. He would not be excused because of the fact that he was an Indian. Similarly I did not see any reason why a servant of an American should be let off here. My friends told me that I would be in deep trouble if I did not hush up the case. I was pretty furious.

But nobody even touched a hair on my head. On the third day I had a call from a mutual friend who works in industry whether the American chief could meet me. I told him that it was perfectly fine for me to meet anybody. He came to see me with the biggest basket of roses I have ever seen; there were also American chocolates. He told me that what I had done was perfectly right. He sent me chocolates last Christmas. He left India a few months ago; I will not have American chocolates next Christmas.

Another colony we struck in the same week was Andheria Bagh. Thirty-two bungalows had been demarcated but only six had been constructed. The next day the newspapers carried the story that three of these bungalows belonged to a cabinet minister. He rang me up, wondering how the newspapers had misrepresented the facts. He said that he had nothing to do with these bungalows. I told him that I was greatly relieved because it would be very embarrassing for me to demolish structures belonging to a very senior cabinet minister.

After I had moved in and demolished the roads leading to 119 bungalows opposite the international airport, we received a note from the Prime Minister's Office that he was calling a meeting to discuss the issue. I was highly cheesed off. Why was the Prime Minister of

Making a Difference

the country sparing time to talk about some unauthorised structures? There were obviously more important issues to attend to, like the millions who did not get enough to eat. I promptly called the adviser to the industrial group and told him that in case I received directions from the PMO not to demolish these structures I would reduce them to rubble the next day. I am accustomed to shooting off my mouth. I do it to sound courageous. You have not only to be courageous, you also have to sound courageous. Sometimes you can get away by barking, you don't have to bite. I told the adviser, who was a highly respected man in business circles in Delhi and a very fine gentleman, that he could promptly inform his principal of what I had said. He faxed him a message immediately. He showed me a copy of it the next day. Within half an hour of his sending the message, there was a call from the PMO that the proposed meeting was cancelled. I felt jubilant. Once again I had got away with it. I am all admiration for the PMO. I am also all admiration for the industrialist who understood my sensibilities.

When I came to Delhi I was told that I could not touch a single man in Delhi because everybody was highly connected and powerful. I have touched almost everybody who is somebody in Delhi. I have pulled down 14,000 structures and reclaimed 1,500 acres of land, worth Rs. 10,000 crores. Most of these structures belonged to the rich and the powerful. Nobody has ever touched me. No politician or bureaucrat has ever told me to do something or not to do something. All the politicians who get in touch with me are overflowing with courtesy. Even most of those whose buildings I have demolished have become friends of mine. After all I have not done something which was irrational or arbitrary. I have only enforced the law of the land. Even they realise that. I have survived for three-and-a-half years in this job. I have a year-and-a-half to go. I have disproved the myth that anybody who does his job is bound to get kicked out within days or maybe a month.

There was a surprise on 20 September 1995. The vice-chairman,

Rudra, the Destroyer

DDA, Anil Kumar, a 1965 batch IAS officer, issued orders shifting me out of my job as commissioner (land management) to the post of commissioner (systems & training). My responsibility as commissioner(S&T) would be to switch on the computer in the morning and switch it off in the evening. Great job of national importance! I wrote to the vice-chairman as follows:

I am an appointee of the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC), chaired by the Prime Minister. Only the ACC has the authority to transfer me out.

Once an appointment has been done to a post under the Central Staffing Scheme, only the ACC is competent to transfer the officer out; no other authority is empowered to transfer the officer.

It is learnt from the Department of Personnel that the ACC has not transferred me from my present assignment of Commissioner(LM) to the post of Commissioner(S&T). In any case the ACC would not approve of such a transfer because the post of Commissioner(S&T) is not a post for appointment through the ACC.

A post under Central Staffing Scheme cannot be filled by a DDA official who has not been cleared by the ACC. U.S. Jolly, a DDA official, has not been cleared by the ACC for appointment to the post.

In the above circumstances, the order issued by you transferring me from my present assignment is unauthorised and has no power of authority. I am not accustomed to obeying unauthorised orders. If you desire to transfer me from my present assignment, you may obtain the sanction of the ACC before issuing such orders. Under the above circumstances, I shall not be handing over charge of my present assignment.

Making a Difference

I did not hand over the charge. The lieutenant governor was furious. So was the vice-chairman. I met the LG and asked him why I had been transferred as I had come on deputation on a five-year tenure. I told him that he had been highly supportive of me in the past and had been telling everybody that I was doing a great job. So how come I had become dispensable all of a sudden? He told me, 'Don't ask questions. It is for the administration to decide.' I told him that the administration has to be fair to officers who do a good job. But he told me that he was not answerable to me. I told him that I was going to fight it out because it was a moral and ethical issue for the bureaucracy. Across the country bureaucrats were being treated like dirt, being transferred in and out of jobs at the whim and fancy of politicians and bureaucrats. How could the country be governed if this was the state of affairs? Bureaucrats across the country were living in perpetual panic under the shadow of the threat of transfers and suspensions. I told him that somebody had to begin the fight and I was making a beginning. The LG looked very unhappy. On this day I had no particular reason to make him happy either. I left Raj Niwas disgusted.

It is not only the politicians who are responsible for breaking the steel frame. Civil servants share the responsibility. P.K. Dave was a civil service administrator. I felt sorry for him.

Hell broke loose in the media over the next one week. They attacked the government, the LG and the vice-chairman ruthlessly. The public was shocked. Almost every newspaper wrote an editorial condemning the transfer. There was story after story on television, commenting on the immorality of the transfer.

I was surprised by such overwhelming support from the public. The *Times of India* conducted a poll in association with MODE which was published in the newspaper on 22 October 1995 (TOI-MODE POLL). It showed that 89 percent of the people of Delhi supported me. I never knew that I enjoyed so much support in the capital. According to the poll, 60 percent of the people also believed that the

Rudra, the Destroyer

land mafia was behind my transfer. It asked the question whether it was correct for government officials to be activists and outspoken like Seshan, Kiran Bedi and me. As many as 66 percent of those polled opined that it was correct for government officials to be activists and outspoken. Only 34 percent of the people thought that we should maintain a low profile and dutifully carry out the orders of the superiors. The TOI-MODE poll was a tremendous morale booster for me and my tribe.

I met the cabinet secretary, Surender Singh, ten days later. He said that what was done to me was an injustice and that only justice would be done to me. The Department of Personnel put its foot down in spite of the heavy pressure exerted by the lieutenant government to send my case to the ACC for reverting me back to Kerala. If the ACC transferred me there would be nothing I could do. They refused to send the file to the ACC. There are still some men of steel in the Department of Personnel.

I have been able to do what I did with media and public support. When I was in Delhi fifteen years back there were strong prejudices against south Indians. I have not experienced any such prejudice in the past three-and-a-half years. I do not think that there has been any dramatic change in prejudice in this country. It may be that people have learnt to overcome their prejudice when they see performance. South Indians are not despised any more because a lot many of the big performers in the recent past have been from the south. When they see somebody doing a job which they feel is heroic, taking on the underworld single-handedly and fearlessly, I believe people learn to set aside their prejudices and admire the person. I get incredible support from the public. I almost feel ten million people in this city are in one voice backing me.

Some Reflections

I have been in the IAS for the past sixteen years. I have been able

Making a Difference

to do almost whatever I wanted to during this time. I have almost been militantly independent. I have had no interference in my job at all. Surprisingly, this is only my fifth posting. Many people say that the system does not allow anyone to do what he wants to do. Therefore, nothing much happens in this country. I have never blamed the system. I believe that I am the system. I believe that every officer in the all-India services should create systems under which he can function effectively. Instead of blaming the system, if people get down to applying themselves, they can achieve miracles. One does not have to be a revolutionary, or to have revolutionary ideas either. One merely has to play around and create the system wherever one is functioning. This is what I have tried to do.

I have never talked about revolutionary ideas. I have always talked about pedestrian ideas. There is nothing revolutionary in literacy, family planning, health care or even demolition of buildings. These are the most pedestrian ideas that anybody can think about. I specialise in the art of getting to the roots of pedestrian ideas and getting them done effectively. There are tons of literature written on literacy. There are tons of literature written on family planning. And corruption and any other subject of importance you care to name. Nothing happens. But I find that some of these are the easiest problems to work upon. We took up the most pedestrian idea first—literacy. We made Kottayam the first fully literate town in the country. We went on to become the district with highest literacy in the world—99.6 percent. We mobilised the entire district and we had about 15,000 volunteers to take our message to every home. We had to work very hard. We put in a lot of time and effort. But it was not impossible. We did it. No one interfered with our job. Every political party cooperated with us. In fact, they competed with each other to make the programme a success in their areas. Some bureaucrats were happy; others were jealous. We took up a pedestrian idea and gave it celebrity status. We put Kottayam on the international map. The

Rudra, the Destroyer

Unesco brought out a supplement on our work from Paris. Major newspapers in the world wrote about what we did.

We implemented family planning with the same zeal as literacy. Even though Kottayam district has a 40 percent Christian population, mostly Catholic, whose church forbids any form of family planning, the district became the most successful in family planning. It became the first district in the country to go under ten in birth rate, under ten in infant mortality rate and under one in maternal mortality rate. Infant mortality rate in India is 77 per 1,000 and maternal mortality is 4 per 1,000. The district which should have been the biggest failure in family planning became the best success story. How did we do it? We just did it. After all, there is nothing original about family planning.

People told me that I have done a brilliant job, demolishing 14,000 unauthorised structures in Delhi. We have touched the who's who of Delhi. I don't understand what is so brilliant about demolishing structures. You do not need brilliance to demolish buildings. All that you need is guts and common sense. The technology we use is very simple. I use bulldozers. They are very strong. I support them with my mental strength. I have also developed the requisite mental strength in a lot of people around me. I don't need to be everywhere lending my mental strength to the bulldozers any more. My men in the field have it too. The same men who would sit up all night before they touched a brick in the capital do not bat an eyelid before demolishing a mansion of the most powerful politician in the capital now. I merely have to lead them by example. The example was not of intellectual brilliance or extraordinary capabilities. It was one of merely exhibiting good intentions and a sense of purpose in one's job. Once my subordinates saw it they picked up the drift. The same men who would be making millions in the past through allowing illegal structures are the people who are doing an excellent job today. Most of them have lost their earnings. But they are very happy that I have given them honour. Today, the

Making a Difference

land management department of the DDA is feared and respected.
Everyone knows that we mean business.

8. Jana Shakti

I am deeply pained, as are most people, by the state of the country. I see a total sense of hopelessness among 900 million people. Everybody says the situation is hopeless. What has happened to the nation?

Once, in the ancient past, India had the greatest civilisation on earth. When today's advanced nations were still peopled by savages, we were coming out with the best in philosophy and astronomy. Then the decay began and now it is the pits. Whenever I speak to schoolchildren, I tell them not to sing '*Sare jahan se achcha Hindustan hamara*' (India is the greatest country in the world) as it would be self-deception. Frankly, what are we best at in the world? Yes, we have the two most beautiful women in the world. Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai are the best. Sush, whom I know, is also brilliant and human. What else are we best in? I don't know. No child knows. Let us not teach our little innocent children the art of self-deceit. If we are sick we have to diagnose what is wrong with us; it is no point pretending that we are all Mike Tysons when we can hardly stand up and breathe. If we are sick we should get ourselves treated.

When India was down at 120 for 8 against Sri Lanka's 251 in the 1996 World Cup Cricket semi-finals at Calcutta, a capacity crowd

Making a Difference

of 100,000 prevented Sri Lanka from completing the proceedings; India forfeited the match. India should hang its head in shame. But I am very optimistic. I tell these children that in five years we can sing '*Sare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara*' with pride if each one of us stands up and works for it. Don't expect anybody else to stand up and fight for you. You have got to do it yourself. But let us diagnose what is wrong and where.

The Human Development Index released by the UNDP, which measures three key components—longevity, knowledge and income—ranks India at 134 out of 170 countries in 1995. In the report for the previous year we were 129th in the list. When the report is ready next year, we shall be close to 140. Most countries in the Asian region and some of the poor countries in Africa have done much better than India. The report is an objective indicator of the health of a nation. According to it we are nowhere. The world is progressing; India is regressing. Who will stop the rot? Not our rulers. They have bigger concerns. Like hawala money.

I have been thinking about the state of affairs for a long time. In 1989,¹ I wrote a book titled *What Is the Wrong with the Nation Today ?* I could not publish the book, even though I had taken an advance from a publisher, as I was assured that I would have lost my job in seven days. I was not yet ready to lose my job. It was a large book which went into a thousand pages. My book made the following diagnosis:

What Is Wrong

1. People
2. Bureaucracy
3. Economy
4. Religion
5. Politics
6. Education

7. Judiciary

How come a people who claim to be the inheritors of a civilisation 5,000 years old have degenerated into a nation where 48 percent of the people are illiterate and 38 percent are starving? We don't have the mental make up to get going, to deliver things. We as a nation are the biggest talk-factory in the world. We talk a lot but do very little. We find fault with everybody else other than ourselves. We discover how others are messing up their countries. We are the most moralistic nation in the world. We try to preach to other nations how their materialistic culture is depriving them of their soul. But we are rotten inside. We have millions of women and children who get beaten up and some murdered brutally not for asking for human rights, but merely for asking for the basics of survival. We condemn apartheid worldwide. We speak in glowing terms about Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, but we are the most colour conscious people in the world. We practise apartheid of the worst kind in this country. Just look at the matrimonial columns in our newspapers. It is not the dark, tall and handsome variety our Indian girls are looking for. It is the fair, tall and handsome variety that most look for. A dark girl is a big liability on the parents. They will do anything to make the girl fair. Parents who can afford it, feed their daughters gold and honey. They are supposed to grow fair after they have eaten a few sovereigns of gold. 'After a white man appears in a party, everybody wants to shake hands with him; if it is a white woman everybody is salivating,' says my friend Jag Uppal. We oppose the white man from our political platforms, we make a demon out of him in our textbooks, but we adore him in our heart of hearts. I have nothing against the white man. I have nothing against any race. Every race is fine and needs to be respected. But in India, any person who is dark and curly haired is branded a Madrasi and despised.

We as a people are third-rate. Let us accept it. The civilisation of a people is manifested in the behaviour of its people. Civilisation

Making a Difference

is not something insubstantial, to be absorbed from the air. If our behaviour does not manifest a civilisation which we claim was the most glorious, we have no civilisation. If our civilisation does not lead us to a plan of action for survival which would provide the basic minimum to our people, we have no civilisation. We have more than 450 million people who are illiterate, 360 million who are starving. Every year we add another 20 million to this number. We have not found the solution. We have not tried to find the solution. We merely write project reports; we are the best in that.

We have shown a total inability to apply ourselves to work towards betterment of our people. We claim to possess the third largest trained manpower in the world. Yet. we are one of the most unproductive people in the world. We claim to have the seventh largest scientific manpower in the world. Yet, we even import technology for production of mothballs. We complain to the World Trade Organisation that patent laws and intellectual property rights are colonial in nature. Why ? Because we fear that all the patents would be monopolised by the white man. If we are as brilliant as we claim to be, and if we have one of the largest pools of trained scientific manpower in the world, why should we not come up with inventions and patent them? Should we be scared of intellectual property rights? Why do we live in fear of other nations? We claim to be a sleeping tiger. 'Anyone who is perpetually preoccupied with the mouse cannot appear to be bigger than a cat,' said a friend of mine the other day. We do not even behave like a cat most of the time. We behave like pigs—dirty, filthy, and self-centred. We live deep in the dirt. Unfortunately we don't even realise it; if we realise it we do not acknowledge it; we are a proud people. How sad! What a comedown for a people who claim to be the inheritors of the world's greatest civilisation!

We break the laws without blinking an eyelid. Very few allow themselves to be caught; if they are caught they buy their way out. A lot of people think that it is only the illiterate who break laws. Just

observe for a while at a traffic light. People driving imported cars jump the red light first, followed by those driving Indian makes. The last to jump the light are the cyclists. We blame the illiterates for all the ills of our society. The fundamental law in this country today is: whoever can kick, kicks. A government servant bullies the public; given a quarter of a chance a non-government man would bully everyone around as well. You can get a government officer on phone with great difficulty, but you can't get across to the chief of a medium size private company at all. There will be half a dozen screenings before you are put across to the private secretary to the chief. The private secretary will ask you a hundred questions. She will demand to know why you want to talk to her boss. There is no way you can get across. You criticise government officials for being arrogant. Given a chance any private sector man would beat us at the game.

When I was an assistant collector at Palghat in 1980, this small-time industrialist used to hang around outside my office seeking an appointment with me. I always met him. He wanted to be introduced to the collector, which I did. I was in Bangalore in July 1995 at the IIM and I was talking to a lot of people in preparation for writing this book. The Palghat industrialist had settled down in Bangalore. I rang him up. I was very polite as usual. I told him about the Palghat connection. He obviously did not remember me. I was not surprised because he was doing very well now. I told him who I was. I told him that I was writing a book about India and its crusaders and would like to write about him as he was a pioneering industrialist. He asked who the hell was I to ring him up. Who the hell was an IAS officer? Who the hell was commissioner DDA? Who the hell was anybody on earth for that matter. He asked what the hell I wanted from him. In case I wanted any information, he said, I should write to his private secretary. I asked him for his address. He was furious. 'How dare you ask for my address? Don't you know who I am?' I could not take it any more. I told him to go to hell. I could manage well enough without him. He cooled down. He asked me whether I

Making a Difference

could meet him at his office.

I met him at his office. He was cold and presumptuous. I gave him a piece of my mind for the next one hour. Finally I told him that there was nothing about him which was worthy of being in the biographical portion of my book. To my mind, he beat any politician or bureaucrat in arrogance. This is what money does to some people.

We claim to be the most spiritual nation in the world. In fact, we are possibly the most materialistic nation. While driving just look around you: most new car owners will be driving their new cars with the polythene covers on their seats still intact, which is how the car is delivered. They want to show to the world that they have new cars! Everybody is obsessed with making money. The means is not important. There is nothing wrong with making money but we have a parallel economy which is as large as the white one. A good part of the money in this country is made through illegal means. Such means have to be used most of the time because we do not allow it any other way. What could you do when at one one point of time your country taxed you up to 97.2 percent of your income? You took home only 2.8 percent of what you earned. Most of the millionaires made money through black-marketing, smuggling and other criminal means. We *are* the most spiritual nation in the world. We worship money. We respect and adore anybody with money. We worship the black-marketeers, smugglers and criminals. It is these men who are destined to rule the country.

The report on the nexus between criminals and politicians is just the tip of the iceberg. Even this tip was dressed up before it was released to the public. Some newspapers said that the annexures to the Vohra Committee Report were missing when it was released by the government. In any case, the annexures could not have made any earth-shaking revelations. Everything is known. The nexus between the criminals and politicians in this country is well known. The names are known. Mr Vohra does not necessarily have to give us the names. The people are there for all of us to see. These are the men who govern

our country. They are not only in government. They are also in the opposition. They are in all political parties. A lot of them are bureaucrats in power. Many of them are in the IAS. Some of them are from the police service, the revenue service and the customs. At least a quarter of the people in key government services have links with criminals. These are the men who rule the country today. They are everywhere. They take the decisions.

The criminals get richer. The nexus becomes stronger. The nation watches helplessly. We are a tolerant nation—we tolerate nonsense. We believe this is Indian civilisation.

We have one of the biggest networks of educational institutions in the world. We have the fourth largest English-speaking community in the world. But education does not produce people who can deliver the goods. We churn out the most mediocre products from our educational institutions. A few good people we produce go to IITs and to medical colleges and then go abroad, where they shine. Most Indians abroad do exceptionally well even if they are in menial jobs. Somehow, Indians have this great knack of creating wealth for everybody else. We are basically a very bright people. But at home we are poor performers. Instead of producing graduates capable of performing well in whatever field they are, our educational system is designed to perpetuate mediocrity. It is a mad rush for percentages in the Board examinations. You get a good percentage only if you mug up by heart whatever the teacher has dictated in class, and don't forget to take tuitions in all the subjects just to make sure that you don't miss out on being a topper. If you fail to top you might get beaten up at home by your parents. You might not get into the IIT or into medicine. If they do not get into these two, parents think that their children are doomed. No parent ever worries whether his child is able to think for himself and stand on his feet. Who cares in any way? If this nation does not want thinking young men and women, why should parents bother to groom their children to be independent? Long live mediocrity ! We set up universities by the dozen. There

Making a Difference

was a proposal recently to set up a Rs 400-crore National Institute of Science. We have set up many such institutes in the past. They have all become shoddy affairs. We are perpetually setting up things. Nothing seems to take root. We don't allow it to. When an institute has become third-rate, we spend more money to set up another institute. The project reports are wonderful. Only, if wishes were horses, this country would be a lot different.

Our religion is supposed to be our greatest strength. Indians are supposed to be the most religious people. After all, we have the most ancient religious scriptures in the world. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* date back to a period much before the Bible or Koran. The Gita contains deeper philosophy than any other book in the world. Why it is that such a religious nation has stooped down to the most irreligious behaviour? Who demolished the mosque at Ayodhya? Were they some isolated fundamentalist hoodlums? Hardly. They had the support of all the leaders and thinkers of the BJP, except Vajpayee. What happened? Kalyan Singh, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time, got a one-day sentence. What a pity. Leaders who showed disregard for the Supreme Court will be our rulers. Did the BJP do it alone? Certainly not. I was with a powerful Union minister on 6 December when the mosque was being demolished. When the hoodlums charged into the mosque, the minister rang up the Union home secretary and asked him why the Central police force was not being sent in at least now when the demolition of the mosque was imminent. After all there was the Supreme Court order to ensure that the mosque was not demolished. The Central police force was stationed just a ten-minute drive from the mosque. The home secretary told the minister categorically that he was powerless to do anything. The demolition of the mosque was pre-planned. The Intelligence Bureau had reported three days in advance to the Prime Minister that the mosque would be demolished. Mr Harkishen Singh Surjit, general secretary of the CPM, had met the Prime Minister days before the incident and told him

categorically that the mosque would be demolished and the PM should take appropriate action. The PM said he would.

The Prime Minister's office put out the story that he was cheated by the BJP leadership. They had promised that the mosque would be spared. They betrayed him.

The strength of Hindu religion lies in its tolerance of other people and other religions. Some of its adherents have suddenly become totally intolerant of anything else and everybody else. If a religion kills in the name of religion, it is not God's religion. It is something else. Any religion which destroys the places of worship of other religions is not a religion of God. It is creating division in the society. It is creating hatred among people. The predominant religion in a country has to come up with ways of integrating people of other communities into the national fold so that the country progresses. But when the leading religion becomes intolerant and is out to destroy other religions it is no more religion. It is no more culture. It will be condemned to be destroyed; it will eventually destroy itself and the nation.

I do not think that other religious groups in this country are blameless. Most of them have retreated into their shells and have become fundamentalists. So we have Muslim, Sikh and Christian fundamentalists in this country. This becomes dangerous when you retreat into your shell and see the rest of the world as an enemy. Religion has to think of progress. But you cannot talk about progress only for some people at the expense of others. We all have to grow together. We have no option. But we in India do not seem to learn. We have gone back by a thousand years in the past ten years. In the name of religion and caste, we have destroyed the country. In the rest of the world, people seem to be coming together to do things. Here, we get together to destroy each other. Where can we go from here?

The best system in this country, among the three arms of the government—legislature, executive and judiciary—is the judiciary.

Making a Difference

In spite of everything, the judicial system still seems to work, by and large. We still have an autonomous Supreme Court with judges of integrity. It seems to be the only voice of sanity in a madhouse. The overwhelming problem is that there are far too many cases pending in various courts. Justice delayed is justice denied. You don't expect timely justice in Indian courts any more, though some judges have tried, for example former chief justice M.N. Venkatachaliah of the Supreme Court, who did a lot to speed up the judicial process. Nevertheless, there are thousands of cases pending in the Supreme Court and millions in the other courts. There are of course many more cases pending in lower courts for more than twenty-five years. Today the best way to beat justice is to go to court and get a stay. If you have a smart advocate the stay will continue for the next twenty-five years. By then the opposite party may die. You can enter into somebody's property and throw him out and get a stay. You may go to the court and seek justice; but the man who threw you out would already have got a stay against dispossession. You could live on the street for the rest of your life and die. The man who threw you out would obviously start litigation only in the lower-most court. You could then file appeals in the next five higher courts over the next ten years. You would never get your property back in your lifetime or in your children's lifetime. There are millions of cases like this in various courts.

Similarly, you can encroach upon DDA land and get a stay against eviction. Protected by the stay order, you can put up structures, sell them off and move on to the next target. There is nothing the DDA can do about it. If one tried to evict them there would be contempt of court. You could be stuck in courts for the rest of your life. In the 20,000-odd cases pending against the DDA in various courts, in most of the cases, there is stay against dispossession and eviction. By the time stay orders are vacated, most of them maybe after ten years, the encroachers will not be there any more. They will have sold the properties and gone away. They would have made their

Jana Shakti

millions. As would those who assisted them.

Sushil Sharma, who was being searched for high and low by Delhi Police in connection with the murder of his wife, found cut into pieces and burnt in the tandoor of his restaurant in New Delhi, was granted bail by a district judge who was on the verge of promotion to the high court. He had no problem getting bail 3,000 kilometres away in another state with a forged address. In the same week, Rajan Pillai, who was wanted by the Singapore government, was produced before a magistrate in Delhi. Rajan Pillai was dying of cirrhosis of the liver. The magistrate refused to grant him bail. He was remanded to Tihar Jail, which houses the worst criminals of the country. Kiran Bedi had cleaned up the place, but she was no more there. Even though Rajan Pillai was medically examined on admission, he was not provided adequate medical treatment by doctors in the jail for the next three days. Even when he vomited blood and was unconscious, proper care was not given. He died.

The only responsibility of the government of India in an extradition case is to deliver the accused to the foreign government in good shape. Rajan Pillai was not being tried in India for a criminal offence. We had no business to kill him. He should have been delivered in good health to the Singapore government. If he had committed a crime there he would have been punished by them. He escaped from Singapore to his home country hoping to get justice. He still remembered his school lessons extolling India as a kind and compassionate country with a civilisation. He made a mistake.

Sansar Chand is single-handedly responsible for the virtual destruction of wildlife in north India. He was committed to trial in 1974. The court granted him bail. He was convicted in 1994, after twenty years. In the meanwhile he had plundered the entire north. He jumped bail on conviction in 1994. After a Herculean military-like operation, he was nabbed. He was produced before a judge, who promptly granted him bail!

Harshad Mehta, the biggest confidence trickster this country has

Making a Difference

ever produced, leads a luxurious life. He stole thousands of crores of rupees from our banks, he broke millions of homes, he owes the government over Rs. 3,000 crores in taxes. He will continue to live in style because a lot of influential people have received favours from him. We are a kind nation.

Exactly a week after Nick Leeson landed in Singapore he was sentenced to a six-year jail term. Judicial systems in some countries seem to work effectively. It is over ten years since 10,000 people were killed in the infamous Bhopal gas tragedy. The culprits have not been brought to trial yet. The Union Carbide chief then, Warren Anderson, lives in comfort in the United States. He is lucky India is not Singapore.

There are some activist judges in the Supreme Court who are trying to get things moving. When the executive failed to deliver, Justice Kuldeep Singh took the initiative to clean up the environment. His judgement in the M.C. Mehta case is going to have a long-term impact in cleaning up Delhi. I also contributed a little by working out a package for utilisation of land by the industries which have to shift out. Justice J.S. Verma struck the biggest blow through the Jain hawala case.

Politics in this country has deteriorated to a level not seen anywhere else in the world. It is true that there are bad politicians all over the world. But our country seems to have a talent for producing the worst. Sushil Sharma, who had been a leader of the Delhi Youth Congress, was caught because of an alert police constable and a conscientious lady selling vegetables on the footpath. If not for these two people, Naina Sharma would have vanished without a trace. There are thousands of people like Sushil Sharma in this country, not only in the ruling party, but in all political parties. Many of his tribe occupy important positions. A certain Yadav, a known supporter of a former Prime Minister, raped his eight-year-old daughter, killed her, packed her into a suitcase and left the body at Rajghat. The last remains of Mahatma Gandhi are at Rajghat. Such

Jana Shakti

people commit the worst crimes and get away with them because politicians always get away in this country. Politicians commit crimes in other countries too, but they are caught, tried and jailed, as in Japan and Italy. In India they are worshipped. There does not seem to be much hope as the younger generation in politics does not seem to be any better than the old bandicoots. We accuse the British of looting our motherland. Our politicians are no less. There are, of course, some exceptions. But these are far too few in number. These few honest men are sidelined in our political system. Politicians who are thrown out from the states on corruption charges are inducted into the Union cabinet. If they are not good enough for the states how can they be good enough to rule over the country?

We teach in our school textbooks that the British murdered the natives. Children are told that Jallianwala Bagh was one of the worst incidents of cold-blooded murder by a heartless colonial power. But what happened when 113 tribals were killed in Nagpur in 1994? What was their crime? They wanted to meet their minister. The minister was an elected representative from their constituency with the mandate to represent them. They wanted to meet him to represent their problems. They came in large numbers. The minister refused to meet them the whole day as he was too busy. Too busy doing what? Ministers and bureaucrats are too busy doing precious little. If they were all so constructively engaged all the time, then this country would have been a lot different. They all give the impression that they are moving mountains; but in fact they do not even move a molehill; otherwise we should not have 450 million illiterates who live in abject poverty. Sorry, they do not have time to meet people. They are busy improving the lot of our poor people. Why should people disturb them? The minister refused to meet them the whole day. The marchers got impatient; the police used force on them and the poor tribals ran for their lives. But they could not run away. The police had effectively barricaded the entire area. Anybody who tried to escape was beaten up. In half an hour 113 people were dead.

Making a Difference

An administrative inquiry was ordered by the state government. I am told a judicial inquiry was also ordered later. As usual the inquiry commission will submit its report after many years. Nobody will ever read it. When the issue is raised in the Assembly after many years, they will set up a committee to go into the inquiry commission report. The committee will submit its report many years later. There will again be an Assembly question many years from then. Who said democracy in India does not thrive? It is bubbling all the time. The Nagpur massacre will not find a place in our school textbooks. Jallianwala Bagh massacre will continue to be there. Down with the colonisers.

Even after nearly fifty years of independence, freedom means little in real terms to most of our people. Contrary to all expectations, the common man is worse off than before. The regulatory regime has become cumbersome and unresponsive to people's problems.

Corruption rules. It permeates every facet of life. In many government offices, it is institutionalised. There are rates fixed for everything. If you want to get your house plans cleared, there is a rate for it, depending on the area to be built and the location of your plot. You have to pay money even to be allowed to serve your sentence in peace in jail! Raj an Pillai was allegedly asked to cough up cash and goods—a Maruti car—if he wanted to escape harassment in jail. The number of examples is limitless.

We have built up a state controlled monopolistic system, insensitive and unaccountable to the people of this nation, for whom it was created and who pay for it. Violence, crime and a sense of insecurity have assumed the central position in the social fabric. Elections are manipulated by money and muscle power, undermining democracy.

Societal neglect is destroying the aspirations of the youth, who have little or no opportunities. Over 400 million young Indians, that is more than 45 percent of the population and a number greater than

Jana Shakti

the combined populations of Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, exist without much hope. This is not how a nation should prepare the next generation, nor is it conducive to the national and social unity.

In the next century, a few years from now, this generation is going to be the unfortunate victim of our failures, if we do not act now. People are tired, they want to do something, to reform and improve things. People need and expect tangible rewards for their efforts and sacrifices, at least to live a more tolerable existence. In short, they want a non-violent change to preserve and consolidate their freedoms.

This is a critical time in the history of our nation, as we cross the 125th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, who dreamt about a free India where 'every tear from every eye' would be wiped out. It still remains a dream. A high-level anti-corruption institution like the Lokpal (Ombudsman) has been repeatedly promised by several regimes since 1964. But it also remains a distant dream.

A once relatively clean and lauded political and administrative machinery created to serve the public has become self-serving and dishonest. No one follows any rules, laws or ethical norms, though there are enough laws and rules. It is a free for all and everyone for himself.

'Corruption is all-pervasive' was the conclusion of a nation-wide survey conducted and published by the *Times of India* in mid-January 1995. The results showed an overall lack of confidence and mistrust in the integrity of authority. It said that people were near unanimous that to eradicate corruption—and in their opinion 98 percent of the politicians and 97 percent of the police were corrupt—'we have to begin at the top'.

People cannot wait any longer to change things. Jana Shakti was formed towards this objective. Jana Shakti wants a second freedom

movement. Jana Shakti means people at all levels coming up with a plan of action to curb corruption, wherever they are, by organising themselves to demand a better delivery system.

Making a Difference

Everyone has a stake in fighting corruption—the public at large, governments, businesses, unions, non-governmental organisations, professionals and rural and urban organisations. A lesson of the Akhil Bharatiya Samaj Seva Sansthan's success in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh, in dealing with the unscrupulous landlords and moneylenders who tried to grab land from the rural poor, is that a locally organised effort can and does work when people are determined and united.

The first Indian freedom movement was a success because of the firm resolve of the people. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and many others have adopted the same resolve and peaceful methods to fight injustice all over the globe. Now, the time has come to drive corruption away with the same resolve and determination which rid India of the foreign rule. India was weak to be ruled by foreigners. In a free, culturally rich democratic country, there is no reason to be 'ruled' by another evil.

Jana Shakti, a non-ideological and apolitical social movement, wants to bring hope back to India. This grassroots movement was founded by me in October 1994 to peacefully awaken the conscience of the nation to the most fundamental issues facing the country. Jana Shakti wants people at all levels to work together and come up with a plan of action to inform and educate society, that people assert themselves so that our basic rights are not compromised.

Its National Governing Council (NGC) consists of twenty-one eminent persons from all sections of society. They include representatives of social and community groups, professionals, environmentalists, industrialists, business people, academicians and artists.

Jana Shakti believes that India offers a vast pool of ancient knowledge and tradition which can be tapped to restore hope. After extensive discussions and consultations with diverse communities and groups across the nation, the NGC has arrived at the consensus

that the following are the fundamental issues that require immediate action:

1. Corruption
2. Illiteracy
3. Population explosion
4. Environmental degradation
5. Holding of free and fair elections to uphold democracy.

No nation in the world has progressed without sorting out these five fundamental issues. Some people believe that the Manmohan magic will somehow let us take off. History does not prove us right.

Jana Shakti supports total liberalisation because we want the public to be freed from the clutches of bureaucracy. Liberalisation has not freed initiative from the clutches of controls and corruption. In an economic environment of limited resources, Jana Shakti believes that the deepening corruption requires the top priority. Success in curbing this serious problem will lay the foundation to address the other issues. Jana Shakti believes in empowerment at all levels. Land reform is very basic for empowerment in a country like India.

Jana Shakti has no ideology in the traditional sense of the word. Jana Shakti stands for anything that works, that produces results. When I talk about eliminating corruption, people laugh at me. They say I am talking in the air because corruption is a universal phenomenon. Therefore, corruption cannot be eliminated. I say 'All right, let us be pragmatists then.' The only objective of globalisation and liberalisation is to create a competitive economy. If this objective is not achieved liberalisation does not make sense. The extent of corruption here is much higher than elsewhere in the world. Due to this Indian projects costs are far too high; if our project costs are too high our products will be more expensive than others; we will be priced out of the world market. I have suggested a pragmatic solution.

Making a Difference

We should study the global corruption rate scientifically. If our study shows that global corruption rate is 5 percent, our corruption rate should be +/-1 of 5 percent. This would ensure that we are competitive. I have called this rate 'competitive corruption rate'. I am applying for a patent for the concept and terminology. Maybe I will end up making tons of money! Perhaps every minister and bureaucrat should be made to take an oath that he will stick to the competitive corruption rate when he assumes office. The finance minister can announce the competitive corruption rate for the year in his budget speech.

'The neglect of decades', as Rajiv Gandhi once said, 'cannot be made up in a short time', but we do not have much time. Curbing corruption will be a hard and continuous struggle, needing all-round support and effort. History is full of examples where resolve was the key to redress social problems.

All businesses, large and small, domestic and international, have a direct stake in fighting corruption. Ethical business practices require it, obeying laws demands it and keeping the costs of doing business low necessitates it. Corruption retards development and breeds inefficiency. Quality products require dedicated people and quality practices.

Jana Shakti believes that the Indian and international business organisations doing business in India can also devote resources and exert their influence in curbing corruption. The private sector has considerable influence in demanding cleaner governance, particularly when resource-constrained governments need their investments to create jobs and generate revenues.

It is important to note that economic reforms can bring about development by creating jobs and opportunities in India only if these fundamental issues are dealt with effectively; they have not been adequately addressed so far.

Economic liberalisation places a total faith in the market economy, but the market takes care of only those who participate in

the market. As much as 38 percent of our people live below the poverty line and cannot participate in the market as they have no purchasing power. Our economic approach should aim at bringing them to the market by providing them jobs and other opportunities. Ultimately, the market is the answer. But till most people can go to the market, a democratic system has the responsibility to take care of them by providing them three square meals a day so that the country's citizens can at least survive with some human dignity. Therefore a lot of resources must be spent on the social sector for quite some time.

The country was nearly bankrupt in 1991, when Manmohan Singh was appointed finance minister. He is a brilliant economist and an honest and good man. Suddenly liberalisation became the key word. Manmohan Singh was expected to do magic. He stole a page from my unpublished book every day. How presumptuous! But truly it was all there in my book.

The only rationale for liberalisation is to create competitiveness. The world will come and invest in India because India is one of the biggest captive markets anywhere in the world. Yet the words used in the philosophy of liberalisation were 'we will permit investment', on the assumption that there was a long queue outside and we would in our generosity permit people after appropriate screening. Four years down the line with liberalisation and nothing much seems to have happened. Global investment in India is negligible. Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia get more foreign investment than India. It is no point comparing ourselves with China because China is way ahead. Our per capita income has in fact declined in the past four years. There has been no employment generation in the economy. Our economy is growing only at a snail's pace, while China's is growing at a spectacular rate of 14 percent. Many of the emerging Asian countries are growing at a staggering rate. It was presumed that with liberalisation, India would become a production base for the world market because our labour and raw materials were cheaper. But liberalisation has not produced competitiveness. This is mainly

sMaking a Difference

because liberalisation has been confined to Manmohan Singh's chamber. It has not percolated down to any other ministry. It has not even percolated down to agencies under the Ministry of Finance.

It is true that with delicensing, industrialists do not have to go to as many windows for clearance. Still, they do have to go to some windows. The amount that has to be paid as bribe at these windows has gone up dramatically in the past four years. Now everybody thinks in global terms. Nobody thinks in rupee terms any more—it is dollars now. An officer who took hundred rupees earlier takes hundred dollars today, or around 3,500 rupees. Rates have gone up similarly at all levels, from peons to ministers. Most industrialists have to deal with state governments because industry is a state subject. Things have not improved in the states since 1991, they have only got worse.

The economy has to grow. I was in China last year as a consultant to the Chinese government. I quietly put a rose at Tiananmen Square; I could have got shot. I admire the sense of determination of its government and its people. It is a nation obsessed with growth. Nobody was talking anything else because they realised that growth was the only answer. The more there is in totality, the more there is to share. If wealth is created, jobs are created. When jobs are created, purchasing power is created for the poor people. It does not really matter who creates jobs. Anybody who creates jobs in a country where half the people are unemployed is a god, whether it is General Motors, Dupont, Tatas, Birla or Mesco. It is not by killing the Tatas and Birlas that the poor of this country are going to be saved. It is not by redistribution of their wealth that the poor of this country are going to be fed. If jobs are created, the poor will be fed. Till the poor are fed, the state has to intervene. Therefore, we need the rich. Let us not despise them. Europe grew because of the Protestant ethic that to succeed in the other world you have to be successful here. It would do this country a lot of good if we talked a little less about spirituality and a little more about material well being. Poverty is the biggest

curse. We glorify poverty. It does not do anybody any good. It has not done the nation any good. If we have to get out of the rut, we have to grow upwards of 10 percent per annum for the next twenty-five years. It can be done, provided we let people do it.

What is then stopping us from growing? The bureaucracy. Why does the bureaucracy not let people do their business? Because if we let people do what they want we would lose our clout. Power lies in controls. Power lies in being able to dish out favours. Favours bring in money. Bureaucrats need money because they are highly underpaid. Why are bureaucrats underpaid? Because we are petty. In 1984, the then Prime Minister, the late Rajiv Gandhi, said that for every rupee spent only 16 paise reaches the people. Now probably only 5 paise reaches the people. What happens to the rest? Bureaucrats, politicians and middlemen eat away the balance on the way. Some goes into the pockets of politicians, or rather their offshore accounts. Our politicians have become excellent managers of offshore funds. Many of them can be hired by international offshore fund managers as consultants. Their ingenuity is remarkable, even though many of them are semi-literate. Most of the money, of course, is appropriated by the bureaucrats, though they will not acknowledge it. They would say that the bulk of the money goes to the politicians. It is not true. An officer who pays a lakh of rupees to his political bosses for a posting would make at least a hundred lakh during his tenure in that post. The equation is simple: for every lakh which goes to the politician, ninety-nine lakhs goes to the bureaucrats. The equation may not always be so—it may vary depending on the bargaining power of the politician concerned and the bureaucrat. The politician is not a fool. But the bureaucrat is cleverer. I am told that there are some bureaucrats who do not even have the decency of splitting the booty. This is highly immoral. They should at least have the decency to share the spoils!

The kind of money which a lot of bureaucrats make in this country is incredible. I am told that there are bureaucrats in key

Making a Difference

positions in the government today who are worth more than a thousand crores. There are some bureaucrats who are worth more than three thousand crores! You can never catch them because they are, again, excellent fund managers. One of them has been recently nicknamed 'Bandit Queen' in U.P. What an insult to the original Bandit Queen!

Why do bureaucrats take bribes? I believe that corruption is need based, to begin with. But once somebody has taken the first bribe, then it is no more need based, it becomes greed based. Once they have crossed the Rubicon, there is no going back. Take the actual situation. I have put in sixteen years of service in the most elite service in the country. Today my take-home salary is Rs 5,000. I have had quite a few offers from the corporate sector to work for a crore. I have bought a small flat with a HDFC loan for which I have to pay a monthly instalment of six thousand rupees. This means that I do not take any money home at all. I pay one thousand rupees to the housing finance corporation from my pocket. I have survived in the service quite respectably for the past sixteen years because I have been selling some property or other periodically. I am left with very little to sell now. I may have reached the stage where I cannot live respectably much longer. After I submitted the first draft of this book to the publisher, I sold my flat in Delhi. I bought a gift for my wife on her birthday. A good car. Her old car was breaking down every day. We had a big birthday bash. We took one hundred slum children to Nirula's for lunch. We just invaded the place. We gave them the best. Some of my friends said it was a crazy idea as Nirula's pizzas and hamburgers would not digest in the intestines of slum children. None of them died. Some day I hope that some of them will be able to go to Nirula's on their own. We have some bright children in our Jana Shakti Slum School.

We are not hermits. We are normal human beings. I like to live like a normal human being with a normal family. I do a professional job. I have been working fifteen hours a day and producing results

better than most corporate chiefs in this country. I have, in a sense, also been a corporate chief. If I work hard and produce results, why should I not be paid? Why should I not be allowed to live like a normal human being? I don't need to go to a five-star hotel; I do need to go out to a decent place sometimes. I do like to wear decent clothes. My children love to eat ice-cream occasionally. My wife would like to buy a dress once in a while. I can't afford to do these things with the salary I get. I can't afford to educate my children.

The other day my son told me when he got back from school, 'Appa, I have a sad news for you: you have not paid the school fee for the last semester. Would you mind paying it?' He had a very mischievous smile when he said it. The ten-year-old knows how things are. He has not painted for the past six months because I could not buy canvas and paint for him. I had no money. He does portraits in oil. His portrait of Nelson Mandela is on Mandela's table in Johannesburg. My office is an art gallery; I love his paintings. Which father would not? In spite of being from a fairly well off family, my wife has had to mortgage her jewellery many times to pay school fees. If your child is sick and needs to be taken to the hospital and there is no money at home, what will you do? If your child has been asking for ice-cream and you have not been able to take him out for the past one month, what will you do? An uncle comes along and offers to take him out for an ice-cream. You may not have the heart to refuse because you love your son. Next time it may be a dinner. After the third dinner, the uncle may not be talking about the weather and ice-cream any more; he may be talking about a file pending with you. Thus one slowly graduates from ice-creams to dinner to expensive gifts to actual money. It may not always be so. Some never graduate from dinners to actual money. The first money one takes is usually need based. But once one has taken the first money, it is no more need based. It becomes greed based. Once you have made a

Making a Difference

lakh, you want to make a crore; once you have a crore, you want to make ten crores, and so on. The country is plundered.

Bureaucrats have been the main instruments of corruption in this country. Therefore, bureaucrats have to be paid enough so that they do not have the temptation to take the first money. Some may continue to be corrupt, but at least give a chance to the new ones who come to the service with ideals. Many of those who take money today may stop doing so if they are paid well. After all, nobody is criminal by nature. Jana Shakti forcefully argues that the salaries of government officials across the country should be doubled immediately. Where is the money for it? The solution lies in having much less government. This would mean much less bureaucracy. We can reduce the government employees' strength in the country by half without any problem. The public at large would be much happier. There would be far less people gunning for the citizens. If you reduce the work force by half, you can afford to double the salaries. It would be good for the country because instead of sixteen paise reaching the people, if sixty paise reaches the people, it would much more than make up for the additional salary bill.

J.R.D. Tata long ago had said that IAS officers should be paid a starting salary of fifty thousand rupees so that these crucial decision-makers don't have the temptation to make money. If they make money, it would be disastrous for the country. The government refused to listen and the results are there for everyone to see. If all the IAS, IPS and all-India service officers were paid an average of fifty thousand rupees a month, the total salary bill in the year would come to less than one thousand crores. This is chicken feed compared to the annual budget, which is approximately 2,00,000 crores. If 60 percent of this reaches the people, imagine the phenomenal transformation that could take place in this country. This would mean an additional one lakh crores reaching the people.

Eighty persons are inducted into the IAS every year. Eight and

a half lakh people apply for the examinations. What do you pay these eighty brilliant people? You start with Rs. 2,200. You cannot get a decent stenographer anywhere in this country today for less than Rs. 5,000 per month. You recruit youngsters, give them all the power and the responsibility and then you pay them a salary half of what a stenographer gets! There is something wrong with our thinking. In spite of that the most outstanding youngsters in this country enter the service even today, because it is the best job in the world, giving one the opportunity to do very constructive work. Then you pay them peanuts. No wonder they behave like monkeys!

Almost nobody comes to the Mussoorie Academy with the intention of making money. Almost everybody comes with good intentions. But the rot sets in early when they begin to face the hard realities of life. Idealism evaporates, and the first to cave in are the idealists.

The policy makers who are in charge of the Pay Commission probably would argue that in a socialistic country where so many million people live below the poverty line, IAS officers should not be paid decent salaries. This is very stupid. It is being penny wise and pound foolish. 'You cheat us, we cheat you', is the natural corollary. If anybody wants this country to have a little less corruption, I think we have to start with paying better salaries to key decision-makers. I have already argued for doubling the salaries of government employees; this applies equally to the defence forces. Somebody may ask, how much is a good salary? After all, there are no limits to human wants. The corporate sector in this country pays fabulous salaries to its employees. Should the salaries be comparable? Should we be paid the market rate? In most countries government officers are paid extremely decent salaries. We should also be paid decent salaries so that we can live reasonably well. Let us give decency a chance. Would this solve all the problems of this country? No. But it would be striking at the root of our problems. Let us begin somewhere. We do not have eternity.

Making a Difference

The main features of the Jana Shakti's initial plan of action include:

1. Preparing a plan of action to sort out the five fundamental issues right upto panchayat level. This has to be drawn up and implemented by people organising themselves at the local level.
2. Increasing awareness among the citizens about the magnitude of corruption and other problems and organising them in groups to take on the system from the panchayat to the national level.
3. Identifying agencies and bodies in each and every locality where prompt remedial action may be necessary.
4. Targeting all violators of anti-corruption laws and reporting incidents where functionaries and others demand and accept bribes to the concerned authorities.
5. Establishing accessible and responsive enforcement and judicial process to expeditiously handle corruption cases including improving the existing institutions with adequate resources.
6. Collecting and disseminating information relating to the various Jana Shakti objectives.

Every honest Indian, living here or elsewhere, who agrees with the teachings of our sages and saints and follows his conscience, constitutes Jana Shakti. Each working man and woman who believes in 'reap as you sow', every young person who wants to 'reach for the sky' with hard work and dedication to good values, retired people and minorities, and each and every person with any kind of disadvantage, who is doubly disadvantaged because of the prevalent corruption, all these free and proud Indians represent power, purpose and direction.

Jana Shakti will be guided by that power, purpose and direction from those millions of Indians at home and abroad. It recognises the importance of that sustained support to organise itself in every mohalla, gaon and zila across the country. Jana Shakti recognises the

Jana Shakti

special role of young people and increasingly large numbers of educated and emancipated women of this nation who make a significant contribution in every social movement.

Jana Shakti recognises the significant contributions being made by many other non-governmental organisations. This movement wants to operate in a cooperative fashion with such organisations. Therefore, networking with social, community, professional and policy groups is an integral part of its programme of building bridges and reaching out to people. Jana Shakti has felt encouraged by the support and cooperation of many such honest organisations dedicated to improving social, economic, environmental and political conditions in India.

The Jana Shakti's countrywide network consists of four levels of responsibilities: national, state, district and village levels.

1. National Governing Council(NGC): It will consist of twenty members and a president and be responsible for the proper management of the affairs of the society, including assigning roles and responsibilities to the state, district and panchayat level executive bodies.

2. State Executive Council (SEC): It will comprise a minimum of fifteen members and a chairman in each state.

3. District Executive Committee (DEC): It will comprise a minimum of ten members and a chairman in every district. The district level executive committees will be set up by the respective state executive councils.

4. Panchayat Executive Committee or JSU: It will comprise a minimum of ten members and a chairman for every panchayat. In urban areas, there will be one Jana Shakti Unit in each housing pocket/colony. The JSU executive committees at the panchayat/colony level will be set up by the respective district executive committees. Basic membership enrolment will be at the JSU level.

Making a Difference

Specific action to tackle basic issues will have to be worked out at various levels. The Jana Shakti NGC does not have a panacea for all ills. It is for people to organise themselves at various levels, discuss the problems and arrive at a plan of action. We only want to make people responsive and aware so that they begin to stand up together and demand better governance and better delivery. Any individual who dares to stand up alone will generally get eliminated by the system. But if we organise ourselves as a group and stand up together one can take on the system. If you take on the police singlehandedly you will be put behind bars; but if ten people go to the police station in a group, they will not put you inside; if ten are put behind bars a hundred people should go together; they won't have the guts to take on numbers; petty government officials are basically cowards; big government officials are bigger cowards. Jana Shakti being a grassroots movement, it is befitting that its organisational structure operate from the local panchayat level up rather than top down.

Jana Shakti was launched on 2 October 1994, the 125th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. I do not claim to be a Gandhian; it would be unfair to the Father of the Nation. I do not even agree with everything that he said. But I admire his courage; he had the courage and conviction to take on the biggest empire in the world. He did not give up when he was beaten up. The British tolerated him for almost half a century; though reluctantly, they admired him. The independent India he created couldn't stand him; we shot him in six months. He had his heart in the right place. He also tried to put pride into the nation he was trying to create. He talked about wiping every tear from every eye. The number of eyes and the amount of tears have gone up dramatically. Rich or poor, you get treated like dirt. If you have money, you are, perhaps, a better kind of dirt. Happiness is a question of degrees, degrees of satisfaction, degrees of misery. A lower degree of misery is a higher degree of happiness. We called Jana Shakti the second freedom movement because we felt that it was

Jana Shakti

time we went back to those days following the freedom struggle when there was a belief that certain things would be done. There was hope of a government which would deliver what the Constitution promised. We have made the biggest mockery of our Constitution. The Constitution of India is probably the best written document in the English language. Every time people create a noise that nothing is being done to improve things in this country, we go ahead and amend it. It has become like the manifestos of political parties at election time. They read beautifully. We feel that it is time that this nation began to run its affairs in a businesslike manner, instead of hoping that the country will take off through some feat of magic. We feel that it is time that the nation got down to actual work. We want a working nation and not merely a talking nation because all the countries around the world are working and doing pretty well.

When we launched Jana Shakti we said that we do not want to be just another group of theorists. We decided that we would also get down to the field and dirty our hands. As part of the campaign against environmental degradation, we tried to market the idea that instead of blaming the government and municipalities for not keeping the neighbourhood clean, people should organise themselves to show their concern. We encouraged residents to join the cleaning operation as a token of their concern. However, the idea was not that Jana Shakti or residents' welfare organisations were going to take over the job of keeping streets clean. So, at our cleaning programmes we always invited municipal employees to participate.

Our first cleaning operation was at Sarojini Nagar market in Delhi on 3 October, the day after Jana Shakti was launched. All the 500 shopkeepers joined the operation. We had the municipal employees and Jana Shakti executive committee members participating. All the necessary equipment was brought by the municipality. The shopkeepers also brought a lot of brooms and shovels. In four hours we had cleaned up the entire area; truckloads of garbage was removed. At each shop we called out all the

Making a Difference

employees and told them how to dispose of their garbage. The idea was to ensure that the market always remained clean; it was not to be a onetime operation. We ensured that everybody worked hard. In fact I told all the executive committee members of Jana Shakti that when we were out on the streets we had to work harder than the safai karamcharis. There was no question of anybody supervising and watching the operation. Everybody was supposed to be in action.

The fourth cleaning operation took place on 8 October at Mayur Vihar. The chief minister had put out an appeal to the citizens of Delhi to keep their surroundings clean as north India was rattled by the plague scare. People were cautious about even sending their children to school. We agreed to take our children, aged ten and twelve, to Mayur Vihar for the cleaning operation as they insisted on coming along. We tried to frighten them with stories of plague; they said that if we could risk plague so could they. Owing to the plague scare, not many residents joined us. There were about twenty residents apart from five executive committee members of the Jana Shakti who were with me.

We started cleaning the drainage connecting two blocks of residential buildings. About teiununicipal employees also joined us. Even though they had been asked to bring the necessary equipment for our use as well, they brought very few shovels and brooms. I had in fact written to the municipal commissioner and also spoken to him personally to ensure that the municipal employees would be there in strength with the necessary equipment. The municipal commissioner was very cooperative. We got into action at 10 o'clock. After about half an hour, the municipal employees walked out from the scene on the excuse that the area did not come under the jurisdiction of the municipality. I told the engineer who was in charge of the municipal employees, O.P. Beniwal, that he should not leave as he had been ordered to be there by his commissioner. He said he was leaving. I told him to give me his name as I wanted to complain to the municipal commissioner and the chief minister. After all we had come on the

Jana Shakti

appeal of the chief minister of Delhi. He would not give it. A government employee in this country is a king. From peons to secretaries, they are all kings. You cannot ask the king his name. The municipal engineer felt insulted that his name was being asked. I insisted. He still would not tell me. I did not budge. Finally he gave his name and left. He was furious. We went on with the cleaning operation. After about forty-five minutes, a mob landed up, led by the local MLA. For the rest of the incident I quote from a newspaper report on the next day:

A violent mob of MCD safai karamcharis led by BJP legislator Gyan Chand and a zonal engineer today attacked DDA Land Commissioner K.J. Alphons and seriously injured his wife while they were participating in a voluntary cleanliness drive along with residents of Mayur Vihar Phase-II, a trans-Yamuna colony.

The incident occurred when Mr Alphons went to the area today morning along with his family and other members of Jana Shakti, a newly formed voluntary organisation for social causes, to assist the DDA colony residents in carrying out a drive for removal of garbage from the locality.

Following an argument with MCD zonal engineer O.P. Beniwal, Trilokpuri constituency MLA Dr Gyan Chand also reached the spot alongwith about fifty safai karamcharis and the two incited them to attack the DDA Commissioner and his party, Mr Alphons stated. He alleged that the engineer and the MLA together beat up his wife Sheela severely and the mob roughed up several women who were participating in the cleanliness drive. Mrs Alphons suffered serious head injuries and had to be given seven stitches while her brother-in-law, Davis, visiting her from Kerala, was given four stitches by doctors at the

Making a Difference

hospital.

Apparently, the MLA and his associates were angry with the Land Commissioner as he had ordered a major anti-encroachment operation in the nearby Sanjay Lake area last week in which about 150 jhuggis were demolished. Today's incident appears to have offered them a golden opportunity to settle scores with the DDA officials. According to eyewitnesses, MLA Gyan Chand and engineer Beniwal incited the mob of safai karamcharis by shouting 'Maro isko, ye hi hai jisne jhuggian tudvayee thi' (beat him, he is the one responsible for demolishing your jhuggis).

While Mr Alphons was saved from suffering any serious injuries as his two personal security officers(PSOs) shielded him from the assailants and fought them off physically, his wife and other members of the voluntary group were not so fortunate.

Among the women members of the Jana Shakti group who were roughed up by the broom and stick wielding mob was also Mrs Anita Chauhan, wife of cricket star and BJP Member of Parliament Chetan Chauhan. The Land Commissioner stressed that his PSOs had acted with restraint while defending him and did not open fire on the riotous mob even though they received several injuries. However, someone in the mob had fired in the air with a countrymade pistol, he charged.

The women in the group were saved by the local residents who escorted them away to the safety of their flats, while the DDA commissioner took refuge in the police post of the colony which was surrounded by the violent mob. Mr Alphons stated in the evening that the altercation originally started after MCD zonal engineer O.P. Beniwal who was in charge of the safai karamcharis refused to assist

in the cleanliness operation saying that a particular park in the area was not under MCD jurisdiction.

He went away with his sanitary staff and returned an hour later with Dr Gyan Chand and a large mob.

The DDA official also informed that he had written to the municipal commissioner in advance informing him of their intention to carry out a voluntary garbage removal drive with the area residents following a call given by Delhi Chief Minister Madan Lai Khurana to launch a 'clean Delhi' campaign.

The municipal commissioner had agreed to direct his local sanitary staff to assist the Jana Shakti activists and Mayiir Vihar residents in the drive, he said.

A complaint was lodged with the area police by Mr Alphons late in the evening against the persons involved in a violent attack on him and his group.

Another complaint was lodged with the police by the alleged assailant O.P. Beniwal who charged that Mr Alphons had caught him by the collar and threatened him with a pistol. The safai karamcharis sat in dharna before the Mayur Vihar Phase-II police post during the day threatening to go on strike if action was not taken against the DDA commissioner.

Mr Alphons, who has earned a reputation for his vigorous and unrelenting drive against encroachments and unauthorised constructions in Delhi, later met Chief Minister Khurana and Lt. Gov. P.K. Dave to apprise them of the unsavoury incident. Both are stated to have assured him that strict action would be taken against the persons responsible for the incident.

Dr Gyan Chand was not available for comment till late in the night. However, his family members insisted that he had not attacked the DDA official or his wife. On the contrary,

Making a Difference

they charged that Mr Alphons had threatened him after he arrived at the site where the row was on. Meanwhile, the DDA Engineers' Association today expressed shock at the incident and condemned the unscrupulous elements and unauthorised builders of the area who were involved in it. Association general secretary Param Yadav demanded strong action against the persons who had attacked Mr Alphons failing which he threatened that DDA staff would go on a strike (*Hindustan Times*).

It is a miracle that we survived to tell the story. We could all have been killed. Though the CM promised action against those who were responsible, he did nothing. He heads the BJP government in Delhi. Women are supposed to be considered goddesses according to our ancient teachings. Yet the CM or his party did nothing when my wife was beaten up. They beat up a few other women also who were with us cleaning the drain. Both my children sustained minor injuries; they were almost lynched. They were saved only by my security guards when they drew their guns. The engineers were let off; not even an explanation was called from them. No action was taken against any of the safai karamcharis. The chief minister is the big boss of the Municipal Corporation. We wrote to the president of the BJP in Delhi:—several times. But no action was taken by the party against the MLA. We never got a reply. We never got a call. Finally I wrote to the president of the BJP as follows:

Dear Shri Advaniji,

You may kindly recall the incident in which my wife was beaten up by the BJP MLA Dr Gyan Chand in Mayur Vihar on 7th October, 1994. It was headlines in all the newspapers all over the world. I am sending you just two clippings to revive your memory. My wife had spoken to you on phone a week after the incident. You were extremely courteous to

Making a Difference

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her. You had promised that appropriate action would be taken against the criminal MLA. Since BJP government was in power in Delhi, you had also promised that suitable action would be taken against the officials responsible for the crime as all the 200 persons involved in the riot were municipal employees working under the government of Delhi. The first person we met after we got beaten up in Mayur Vihar was Mr Khurana, chief minister. He came out of his house and met my wife who was lying in a pool of blood in the car.

It is more than ten months since the incident took place in the capital of the country. In any civilised society the accused would have been arrested and sent to jail on the same day. Nothing has happened to any of the accused so far. This is most shocking. The BJP claims to be a party which has the legacy of a civilisation which is 5,000 years old. Your party has been talking about taking over the ; country and putting some pride back into our nation. I have heard that Indian civilisation talks about respect for women. I have heard that your party professes to restore such values to this nation when you come to power. Your government is already in power in Delhi. I am surprised that your party in power in Delhi is not serious about upholding the values which you profess to restore. How can the country believe that when your party comes to power at the national level it will be different from other parties, since your party has done nothing when such a heinous crime was committed by your MLA on women who were cleaning drainage on the appeal of your chief minister during the plague. I am sorry that your party's commitment to values is merely on paper, like most political parties whom you have condemned as parties with no moral values; your party too appears to make such commitments to values on paper. I

Making a Difference

still hope that I am proved wrong. I thought it was my duty to bring to your notice my bitter feelings on this issue as you are a highly respected national leader.

sd.

K. J. Alphons

We had all the pictures of the rioting. Some resident who had bought a new camera had been clicking away the complete sequence of events. This was something like the Rodney King incident in the U.S. Rodney King got a few million dollars as compensation. The policemen who were responsible were dismissed from the service. In this so-called most civilised country of ours, there was not even an apology from anybody. Instead there was a demand from the MLA that I should be arrested for threatening him with a pistol! Some joke! I always carry my pistol for self-protection even when I go jogging. After all I have demolished 14,000 structures in Delhi. A lot of people have lost money on account of my actions. They would be happy with me dead. I want to stay alive to do my work. I would have been perfectly justified if I had fired. My wife was lying unconscious in a pool of blood; the rioters had almost lynched my children. No court in the country would have indicted me. I did not shoot because if we had opened fire, people would have got hurt. My securitymen were keyed up for action. They thought there was no way out; but I told them that we could not start shooting people while out on a public service exercise. We would rather die.

Over the next three days more than 3,000 people visited my house. There was not even an inch of standing space in my flat in Asiad Village. Most of the people who came to see us were total strangers. The city was incensed. Over the next one week, the media carried front page stories, not only in India, but all over the world.

I contacted the additional commissioner of police, Maxwell Pereira, on phone after we got back from the hospital in the evening

and gave him the details of the incident, including the presence of a sub-inspector and a constable with the mob. I sent him the complete sequence of photographs.

I told him I had pleaded with the sub-inspector, who had a wireless set with him, to call for more police support. He did nothing. My PSOs were forced to draw their revolvers when my children were threatened. The sub-inspector stopped them and asked them to surrender their weapons. They refused to do so; it would have left my children defenceless.

I filed an FIR. In this, at the request of Pereira, I did not mention that the police were there. For all this, nothing has happened. There has been no action. No one has been arrested.

I did not speak to the commissioner of police even though he was my good friend. I did not speak to Maxwell Pereira for the next six months. Even though I meet the lieutenant governor almost every other day, I never raised the issue with him ever. The new police commissioner, Nikhil Kumar, is a very fine man. I never mentioned the incident to him. I wanted to see what action would be taken in the normal course without exerting any influence. After all I was not exactly a common man. I was a bit of a celebrity.

The LG ordered a magisterial inquiry. I turned down the magisterial inquiry as I had shown the LG the entire sequence of photographs. Three women and two men along with little children do not take on two hundred armed men. We were not such dumb morons. There was nothing to be inquired into by a magistrate. Everything was in black and white in the photographs. As I had been a magistrate in my earlier assignment, I knew what magisterial inquiries were worth; when we don't want to take action and want to sleep over an issue the best course of action is to set up a magisterial inquiry. If more noise is created, a judicial inquiry can be ordered and you can comfortably go to sleep for the next many years. In India we work against the backdrop of eternity.

I am told that the magisterial inquiry in this case was submitted

Making a Difference

six months later. The police did nothing in the meanwhile. After the inquiry report was submitted, I got a letter from the Home Ministry informing me that the LG was displeased with my action in having undertaken social work. I was furious. Nothing has happened to any of those involved in the incident.

Jana Shakti decided not to give up the cleaning operations. The very next Sunday after getting beaten up, we went to clean Gobindpuri, another congested area. We had over a thousand people joining us. My wife was there with the stitches still on her head. I did not take the children this time because my parents rang up to plead that at least they should be spared. They were greatly concerned about the little ones. Nobody touched us at Gobindpuri. Nobody will touch us any more as we enjoy tremendous public support.

Jana Shakti has challenged the Official Secrets Act in the Supreme Court as it believes that most of the corruption in this country originates under the cover of this Act. Everything in this country is a secret. It is an offence for a citizen to have any government information in his possession. It is a crime for a government official to part with any information regarding any file. It is a mockery of democracy

I quote from an editorial:

Using the GianPrakash report on the sugar scam as a handy peg, Jana Shakti has challenged the constitutional validity of Section 5 of the Official Secrets Act. The contention is that an issue involving the misuse of government funds and authority to the detriment of the people at large cannot get the benefit of protection under the Official Secrets Act. Keeping the report under government wraps violated the fundamental right of the citizen to know, as embodied in Article 19 of the Constitution dealing with freedom of speech and expression. While media reports on the scam and on the Gian Prakash Committee's findings suggest that

there has been 'wilful, clear and gross violation of the mandate of the Constitution', the citizens and taxpayers of the country have been deliberately deprived of the details of the scam which has resulted in a ' huge loss to the public exchequer and (done) enormous damage to public interest'. It is argued that both the Act and the relevant portions of the civil service rules, by denying the citizens' right to know who are guilty of gross negligence and fraudulent behaviour, are ultra vires of the Constitution. Legalities apart, the case raises a basic question: should the law act as a shield to those who have caused huge losses to the exchequer? Again, should cases of political malfeasance and bureaucratic acquiescence be afforded the protection of the Official Secrets Act which essentially concerns itself with the larger interests of the nation's unity and integrity? The country will have to await the Supreme Court's verdict on the case, but the people have a right to ask the government whether laws like the Official Secrets Act, the Postal and Police Acts, essentially meant to be used as repressive instruments by an alien regime against the people of this country have any relevance in modern times. Sadly enough, most of the repressive and regressive laws of the British administration—all of the vintage of 80 to 120 years—are still being used by the rulers against the people in democratic India. If ever there were refinements, they were wholly concerned with plugging loopholes which provided redressal avenues for the citizens. The Official Secrets Act is an ugly manifestation of the psyche of rulers in dealing with the ruled. In existence to guard the national interest, it is used to protect vested interests. It is time the entire gamut of administrative laws, bequeathed by the Raj to the people of India, is reviewed and replaced by humane ones taking into account the feelings and

Making a Difference

conditions of the people affected by them (*Hindustan Times*).

Along with the Official Secrets Act, we have also challenged Section 9 and 11 of the Central Service rules and Section 7 and 9 of the All India Services Rules. These service rules govern all the senior bureaucrats in this country. These sections lay down that no government information shall be passed on to the public at all. They also lay down that no officer shall criticise any government policy or action of the government. Jana Shakti fully appreciates that government policy should not be criticised. Once a considered policy has been drawn up it should not be criticised by government officials. But what about government action when it involves corruption? I believe that bureaucrats must have the freedom to expose corrupt actions of the government. The logic is very simple. If my boss murders somebody, I am duty bound to report it to the police. If that is so, why is that I am not supposed to report him when he steals a hundred crores from the government exchequer or from private funds? Stealing government money is a crime. Corruption is stealing money. If it is so, I have as much responsibility to expose his corruption when I see it as I have the responsibility to expose him when he commits a murder. I do not think there is any flaw in the logic. I will not criticise government policy. Corruption is not a government policy and therefore I have the freedom to criticise corruption. Again, perfect logic. Would anybody disagree? Yes, my service rules disagree. Therefore, we have challenged these clauses in the service rules in our writ petition. We hope that along with section 5 of the Official Secrets Act, these clauses in the service rules shall also be held as ultra vires of the Constitution.

Jana Shakti filed a writ petition in the high court, which came up for hearing on 24 November 1995, for the prosecution of Kamal Nath, a Union minister, for allegedly bringing in goods without declaration at the Customs. Ms R Shakuntala, the additional

Jana Shakti

collector, customs fined him. She was transferred out of her job in three days. So much for the equality promised by Article 14 of the Constitution! Jana Shakti has also called for his removal from the council of ministers and cancellation of the order transferring Ms Shakuntala. The high court has accepted the writ petition for hearing. We hope that this will be a good lesson for powerful people.

What is the action plan of Jana Shakti?

We propose to take up contemporary issues at various levels. If it is a national issue, the national governing council of the Jana Shakti will take it up. If it is a state issue, the state level executive committee will take it up. If it is a village issue, the local JSU at the panchayat level will take it up. In urban areas, the JSU should take up issues concerning a colony. Jana Shakti has already taken up the Official Secrets Act as a national issue and has approached the Supreme Court for its views on it. When the people of Kerala were up in arms against a corrupt government, Jana Shakti supported the campaign for replacement of the chief minister. The chief minister was replaced by a very honest politician, A.K. Antony. When the traders of Kerala went on strike against the sales tax department, the state-level Jana Shakti supported the traders because we felt that the sales tax officers were robbing the state at the expense of the state exchequer and the traders. We felt that the state government could do a much better job by tightening the inter-state checkposts and by enforcing the sales tax laws in the production units, instead of these officers being let loose on about three lakh shopping establishments in the state. Much more money could be collected by better enforcement at the 85 checkposts and at about 1,000 production units. If better resource mobilisation could be achieved by enforcement at 1,085 points, why should the state government let loose its officials on three lakh establishments? There would be more revenue accruing to the state government if it concentrated on 1,085 points. States all over the country are out to make life miserable for industrialists, traders and ordinary citizens. Laws must be simplified so that citizens are not

Making a Difference

unnecessarily pushed to the wall. Jana Shakti will argue for simplification of laws and simplified enforcement.

At the height of the Enron controversy, Jana Shakti argued for scrapping of the contract because we felt that the country was being taken for a big ride in the name of liberalisation. Liberalisation is essential but contracts like the one with Enron for a power station in Maharashtra negate the very spirit of it. Instead of having a transparent system where decision-making would be based on market factors, large contracts are being negotiated privately by ministers and at costs which are higher than what is internationally acceptable. Jana Shakti strongly argued that such contracts must be awarded only on the basis of international competitive bidding and not through private negotiations. Liberalisation is a part of the wider philosophy of market economy. Risk taking is the essence of market economy. If profits were guaranteed, there would be no capitalism. That being so, in the name of liberalisation, how could we guarantee profits? How could the Western nations which argue for capitalism and market economy, argue on the side of Enron and others who were demanding guaranteed profits? It may be argued that infrastructural facilities all over the world are based on guaranteed returns. Even if it were so, contracts would have to be given on competitive bidding. The moment you have guaranteed returns on a project, the costs are inflated. This is what happened with Enron. This is what has happened with the dozens of other projects for which MOUs have been signed in various states. Millions of dollars have changed hands in these deals. Can we prove it? No, all the payments are made from offshore accounts. Some pay part of the money from 'educational funds', like Enron did. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. It is not that competitive bidding will wipe out corruption totally. But it will reduce the rates. Even in competitive bidding the bidders are informed what percentage is to be built into the bid amount for 'educating' people. But this is certainly better than private negotiated contracts. Jana Shakti strongly argues for a transparent system. We

Jana Shakti

welcome a hundred Enrons into India, but it has to be in a transparent system.

Jana Shakti's objective is to bring people together so that things get a little better. In a democracy strength lies in numbers. Therefore, it is proposed to establish Jana Shakti units up to panchayat level across the country. We expect people who feel the same about the country to start units and take up issues which are relevant in the village. If roads are built only on paper and not in actual fact, we want the villagers to organise themselves and take up the issue with the district collector. If work is not done by the village officer or the SHO in the village, we expect people to organise in numbers and force them to get work done without money being paid. All these will take time and effort. But the option is between paying bribes for the next ten generations or fighting it out today. We have to decide. It would be better for all of us if we fought it out today.

The youth of the country have a great stake in changing the state of affairs. If things do not improve, they have no future. There won't be a country. There won't be jobs. They cannot raise a family. Therefore, it is proposed to start Jana Shakti units in all the schools and colleges so that students learn to take leadership into their own hands. Otherwise the Sushil Sharmas of the country shall run the country. The choice is yours.

Here is the sad story of a good Samaritan who committed suicide which appeared in a leading newspaper in July 1995.

In a bizarre incident, a 28-year-old youth committed suicide by shooting himself with a countrymade pistol at Priya Cinema complex last night with the intention of donating all parts of his body to the needy. However, not a single organ of his body could be donated due to legal and medical hurdles.

Chandrabhushan shot himself in the throat near Nirula's when the night show was about to end. A resident of

Making a Difference

Pilkhuwa in Uttar Pradesh, Chandrabhushan had graduated from JNU a few years back in Chinese and was doing his post-graduation from Meerut University.

The DCP, South West District, U.N.B.Rao, said that a suicide note in Hindi was recovered which said that he was killing himself in a place which he believed to be a rich and VIP locality so that his body would be taken to the hospital without delay. The note further read that if any body organ was transplanted on a rich man, the money accruing should either be given to K.J. Alphons, Commissioner (Land), DDA or T.N.Seshan, Chief Election Commissioner, to enable them to carry out their activities in nation building. The police said that the youth mentioned being depressed and that he was ending his life as it had ceased to have any meaning for him. The police came to know of the incident at 11.45 p.m. and rushed to the spot. To establish his credentials he had left a copy of his marksheet of Meerut University. The police said that he had come from Pilkhuwa and reached Delhi around 4.30 pm yesterday.

The police said that Chandrabhushan's body was sent to the cardio-vascular unit of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for preservation. The AIIMS said that the sacrifice of the youth had gone waste as they could not touch the body till a legal permission was given by his family to donate the body organs.

Medical experts however say that after the new law had been enacted it has become extremely difficult to make use of even genuine cases of donation because of legal hassles.

Sad. But there are millions of youngsters in this country who feel frustrated like Chandrabhushan. There has to be a solution.

Politics in this country has been totally criminalised. The Jain hawala racket has exposed all the major political parties in the

country, except the left parties. Leaders of all the major political parties, including the Prime Minister, have been accused of having taken money from a hawala dealer. Where did Jain get his money from? From the same sources abroad who finance militants. Politicians have been charge sheeted only when the Supreme Court put pressure on the CBI. The CBI had no option.

The only solution to decriminalise politics is for good people to get into politics. But good people are reluctant. They will only lament the criminalisation. They will only talk. They fear that if good people go into politics they will get immersed in the mire. This shows a total lack of moral courage and responsibility. If things must change the only way is for good people with a track record and courage to enter politics and cleanse the system. There is no other solution. Politics is a hard grind; but somebody has to do it. If nobody does it, this country will not be there any more. It will just break up. Therefore Jana Shakti is trying to build up a movement which will give this moral courage to the good to come to politics. We want politics to be made an honourable word. Politics is too serious a business to be left to bandicoots.

I am trying to network with like-minded people in the country. The vast majority of people in this country are good. They would like to see things happening right. There are a lot of capable people in this country who can do brilliant jobs. We want to bring them together and put steam into the movement so that they stand up and say in one voice that there has to be a change. Capable men with track record should take over the reins of this country. Such people may have their egos, but many of them could do their job brilliantly well. It would be good for the country.

The vast majority of officers in the IAS are honest and hard-working. Most of them get kicked around by petty politicians today. I would like to establish a Jana Shakti unit for bureaucrats so that we can do a professional job and not get kicked around. Most bureaucrats are scared to open their mouths. We want bureaucrats to

Making a Difference

get together so that they can have the guts to take on corrupt politicians and corrupt bureaucrats. If a good number of bureaucrats get together, nobody can kick them around any more. Thus they would be able to do a decent job. It is not easy. But if things have to improve in this country, right-thinking bureaucrats must get together. There is no option. Unless we have a strong bureaucracy the country cannot progress.

Jana Shakti strongly believes that this nation can be right on top of the world in five years. But this will be possible only if people get together to demand better governance. This is Jana Shakti's goal.

We want to sing '*Sarejahan se achha Hindustan hamara*' with our heads held high in five years.