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Uttar Pradesh: Redefining the Challenges

BY PRAMILA JAYAPAL

LUCKNOW, India

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My train clattered along the tracks on its six-hour journey from Delhi to Lucknow. Outside, the land stretched dry and flat into the distant horizon. As if in a messy playroom, an odd collection of things seemed to be scattered around: haystacks, mud huts with rounded tops, a plaster statue of someone holding an Indian flag. Only the brilliant yellow and red of some women's saris provided color in this otherwise brown scene. I had begun my journey into the vast expanses of Northern India, into India's most populated state, Uttar Pradesh.

U.P.'s northeastern border forms the curve into which Tibet and part of Nepal are nestled. Topographically, U.P. contains enormous distances of flat Gangetic plains as well as some of the country's highest mountains. Religiously, it is known for its pilgrimage sites like Varanasi (also known as Benaras) and Haridwar, which lie along the banks of the sacred "Ganga Ma" or Mother Ganges, as the river is called. Over 80 percent of the state's population is Hindu, although it was also, at various times in India's history, the center of several Muslim dynasties

The State's population of approximately 140 million — over half the population of the U.S. — makes it equivalent to the fifth largest country in the world.¹ The people in this "cow belt," as the area is commonly known, are predominantly poor farmers who are sandwiched next to each other in a fight to eke out a living from small swatches of land, or more commonly, as laborers on other people's land.

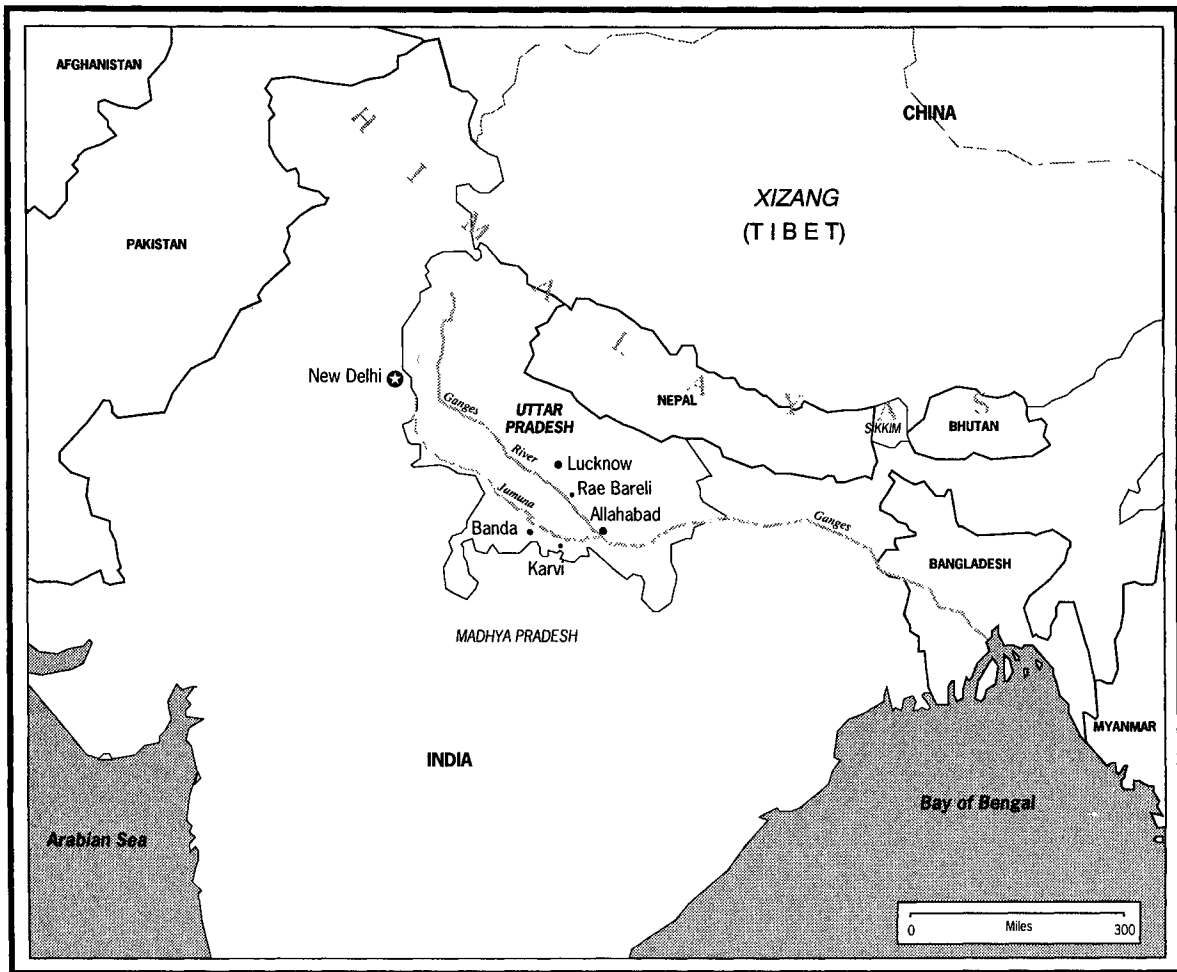
U.P. is a politically charged state. Several important religious and political controversies have occurred recently, including the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque in 1993 by militant Hindus who believed it was the birthplace of Rama, one of Vishnu's ten *avatars* (incarnations). The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the right-wing, upper-caste Hindu party, has made the state the center of much of its activity in Northern India. Most recently, however, the state has been rocked by the strange alliance that formed between the BJP and BSP (The Bahujan Samaj Party, the Dalit and socially backward caste's party) to catapult U.P.'s first Dalit woman, Mayawati, into power as Chief Minister. The two parties, though both pro-Hindu, have traditionally fought for different ends of the caste spectrum. However, the recent realization that alliances are needed in order to win majorities in the Lok Sabha have brought them together into wary collusion.

Development in U.P.

U.P. currently receives the most development funds of any state in India. According to several development workers, until about three or four years ago, development projects funded by foreign funds were fairly new. In the last several years, this scenario has changed dramatically. Several large foreign development agencies have established a presence in U.P. The World Bank has funded a massive Literacy for All

1. 1994 World Development Report, The World Bank, Washington, D.C.

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project. Another World Bank mission recently spent a month in Lucknow to design a water supply project. The ODA (British Overseas Development Agency) is designing a project to clean the Gomti River, and at the same time, develop a planned sewer system in certain cities like Lucknow. USAID has funded a large family planning project, and UNICEF, CARE, Oxfam, and several other development agencies also have offices and projects in Lucknow and the rest of U.P.

With all of these international funds coming in, several new agencies (governmental and non-governmental) are being formed to absorb the funds. Donors, perhaps trying to stay true to the promises they made at the Cairo conference to increase grass-roots participation, are requiring the government to route funds through NGOs. While this is an encouraging shift in involving people who may understand issues better than government bureaucrats, the rate and manner in which some NGOs are forming may be counter-productive. Some government programs actually have targets for forming, for example, 100 self-help groups each month. With such unrealistic goals, the impetus for formation seems to be coming from outside, negating the very concept of "self-help" that made these groups successful in the first place.

Moreover, the recent change in political parties has created havoc in the ranks of the bureaucrats. For the last

UTTAR PRADESH FACTS

(Adapted from *Footsteps Towards a Better Future* by The Times Group of Publications, Lucknow, India, 1995. Data provided by UNICEF.)

- Every 39th person in the world lives in Uttar Pradesh.
- U.P. has the highest birth rate in India at 37 per thousand
- Every second child in the state is not fully immunized
- The share of workers in the total population of the state is just below 31%
- At least 34% of U.P.'s children suffer from severe to moderate malnutrition
- One-fourth of U.P.'s women in the child-bearing age weigh less than 35 kg, and measure less than 145 cm. 75% of all pregnant women are at risk of developing pregnancy complications.
- 40% of U.P.'s population lives below the poverty line
- U.P.'s literacy rate is less than 42%
- 40% of the state's income comes from the primary sector, which engages 75% of the work force

month, newspapers have been filled with announcements of bureaucratic transfers, as Mayawati installs her own people in key positions. According to a recent *India Today* article, in her first 18 days in office, Mayawati transferred 58 Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officers and 108 Indian Police Services (IPS), replacing 60 percent of the posts with officers from scheduled castes.² Some transfers last for three months, some just for one day. A key bureaucrat I met described the sense of malaise going through the ranks of the IAS: "People do not even want to start anything, because they know they might be transferred any day. It's better to keep your head low and hope that no one catches sight of you."

This sense of transience has serious consequences for development efforts. Most of the funds for big development projects come through bi-lateral funders (like The World Bank and the UN agencies) who must work through the government. The government chooses the individuals who will manage projects, without particular reference to experience, qualifications, interest, or donor input. Although the IAS cadre has had the past reputation of being the "best and the brightest" in the country, there are still many situations where even a bright IAS officer in charge of a multi-million dollar project cannot be effective because the subject area is completely new. Added to this is the fact that these officials know they can be transferred at any time, which greatly diminishes their willingness or ability to work with a long-term perspective.

One of my fellow guest house companions, when I told him I was looking at development issues in U.P., assured me I was wasting my time. According to him, "nothing is happening in U.P. People are just pocketing money, and no change is taking place." However, my own experience over the past month, coupled with the perspectives of those who work in the development sector, paint a different picture. It is nevertheless true that the bureaucratic machinery has not been oiled in a long time and politics plays havoc with development and empowerment of the poor. Especially in U.P., where caste politics and poverty are intense, people's faith in big government programs is non-existent. In fact, the main hope people have is in the organizations that are formed at their own level, in their own villages, to address their own particular issues.

Because literacy is so low in U.P., it has always been a focus of development activities. However, few programs have been successful and many articles have been written speculating as to the reasons why. Innovative development programs today have recognized that rather than literacy, education should be stressed: a broader focus that includes everything from basic reading and writing skills to income-generating activities, awareness of the national and international women's movement, human rights, and formation of women's groups that use solidarity to increase power. In addition, the content of traditional educational materials is being seriously challenged, and adapted to include situations, phrases and subjects that are more appropriate to the village context. The old model of building as many schools as possible is thankfully fading, allowing in a more difficult, yet necessary, task of focusing on the quality of an educa-

tion that can best support the lives of these men and women, as well as providing options that perhaps were not open to them before.

Mahila Samakhya (Women Speaking as Equals), an organization that is being showcased at the Beijing conference this month, is one example of a program that is empowering women at the grass-roots level to take charge of their lives, but yet working through and with the government, redefining how a government organization should work.

Road to Banda

We left Lucknow early in the morning, when the sun had yet to break through the horizon and the night's cool air still lingered. I was going with the U.P. State Director of Mahila Samakhya, Nishi Mehrotra. M.S. is a government program that operates in four states in India. It prides itself on its ability to be creative, and to have a program that is flexible enough to meet the needs of each of the diverse districts, regions and states in which it works. As a government organization, it has a pleasantly different feel from many other government organizations; there is little hierarchy between the State level and District level co-ordinators, and the staff are adamant that they will not institute any program ideas that do not originate from the expressed needs of women in the villages. The organization has, by its own description, "a feminist flavor retained only by playing a proactive and hands-on role." MS's definition of education includes everything from basic literacy to fighting against wage exploitation, alcoholism and other common problems that village women face.

Mehrotra and I were going to a town called Karvi in Banda district (on the Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh border) where 30 girls and women were graduating from MS's Women's Education Center (Mahila Shikshan Kendra) after a six-month course. Banda District is one of the poorest districts in U.P. and receives the highest percentage of development funds in the state, although it is unclear what percentage of funds actually make it to their intended destinations. Several individuals who are familiar with the district told me of the trials they faced working under the thumb of corrupt government officers who had asked to be transferred to this district purely to "skim" money from development projects.

The road from Lucknow to Rae Bareilly (Indira Gandhi's constituency) was a smooth, effortless drive, and from Rae Bareilly to Allahabad (Jawaharlal Nehru's home), almost as smooth. Young men in white *bunyans* (tank-top like undershirts) rubbed their eyes as they made their way to the nearest handpumps to wash their faces. School girls and boys walked along, satchels slung over their heads like bandannas. The sun started flashing through the trees like a gentle strobe light, casting its rays on the sodium-filled land around us, on which only a few trees, shrubs and bushes could grow.

Just before Allahabad, we began to see small pools of water for the first time—first, a small patch filled with pretty purple water hyacinths. Just beyond was a kidney-

2. "Living on the Edge," *India Today*, July 15, 1995, pp. 48-50

shaped pond settled in sandy reclamation land. To ensure that the land would not flood, trees and shrubs were planted wherever possible. Past this, the road dipped and there, in front of us, was The Great Ganga. Legend has it that the Hindu gods and demons fought for 12 days over the pot (*kumbha*) that held *amrit*, or the drink of immortality. During the fight, Vishnu ran with the pot and dropped four drops of *amrit* on earth, making four sacred places (Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik). Allahabad is considered the most sacred of the four, partly because it is at the junction of two great rivers, the Ganga and the Jamuna. It is here at the *sangham*, or confluence of these two rivers, that the Great *Kumbh Mela* takes place every twelve years.



A family in the barren terrain of Raniganj, Banda District

Seeing the Ganga for the first time was like reaching an ocean, its vast expanse of water opening up and dominating the scene. Slow cattle grazed in the fields, ambling their way to the water for a drink. A massive bridge, above which were train tracks, spanned the width of the Ganga. To the right, the river took a bend out of sight. The water level looked low, probably reflecting the lack of rain in these hot Gangetic plains.

The road became progressively worse after Allahabad—clearly, this was no politico's constituency. The roadsides had been dug up, and the road itself turned into a narrow, potholed strip that broke the dry brown earth into two halves. It was like entering a wasteland, recalling to mind T.S. Eliot's words: "...where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water..."

This is harsh, unfriendly territory. Not even bushes softened the unforgiving, unyielding land. Banda district is one of the hottest places in India, this year recording temperatures as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit). We began to go through what looked like stone quarry land. Here, rich landowners hire laborers—men to dig out the stone, and women to break it and extract silica sand. For their toils, these men and women earn Rs. 8/day (a little less than US\$0.25). The laborers are allowed to live on the land, but this makes them particularly vulnerable since they can be "evicted" at any time. Their houses are made of small left-over pieces of stone, uneven and often not enough to build walls higher than one or two feet. As a result, the thatched roofs sometimes hang low over whatever stone is there, and the huts aren't tall enough to stand up in fully. There is little water available here, and so the small pond that suddenly appeared seemed like a shimmering oasis. Malnourished animals had taken refuge from the sun under one of the *mahua* trees that existed. The *mahua* flower (an annual) is used fresh and dried to make a local brew. Its seed is also sometimes used to produce oil for lanterns or cooking in

remote places where other oil is not available.

We reached Karvi in the early evening. It is a small town with a main market strip that stretches only a short way. The hardships of life here seemed to be reflected on people's faces. Most of the people on the streets, including the shop sellers, were men. The shops lined both sides of the street—selling the odd luxury item, but mostly essentials: rubber slippers, steel and aluminum cooking ware, school bags, medicines, and lanterns and torches. *Paan* (betel leaves stuffed with cloves and other spices) shops were obviously popular—there were four in a row in one spot. People just sat and looked; there is not much to do until night when it is relatively cool outside. Farther down, Karvi's cinema compound was filled with people who had come to escape this harshness, just for a few hours, to a world filled with heroes and heroines, wealth and glamour.

Mahila Shikshan Kendra

At the Mahila Shikshan Kendra Center, I was welcomed warmly by the students and teachers. "*Namaste Didi! Aapka pahle bar yahan?*" (Hello, sister! This is your first time here?) Women on either side of me entwined their arms in mine, and led me to where children were making models of houses out of mud, delighting in the slimy feel under their hands as they mixed the mud with water. They had even fashioned a map of India on the ground with rolled pieces of mud. The preparations for tomorrow's graduation ceremony were in full force. A big pink and white striped tent was set up to accommodate all the guests; black-and-white pictures of MS activities on large corrugated sheets of plastic were displayed, and women practiced a play they were going to perform re-enacting Chipko *Andolan* (movement), an extremely successful women's struggle to save the forests in the hills.

The next morning was unbearably hot, but it did not dampen the excitement of the 300 to 400 women who had come from nearby villages. They trooped in and seated themselves on the mats under the tent, filling it with

bright colors and incessant chatter. Some were mothers or family members of the girls and women in the program, some were interested in enrolling, and some were just curious about this big *mela* (festive occasion). Fathers, sons and brothers had also come. Ceremonies started, first with bicycle races and then with various plays, testimonials from the girls, and of course, songs. Songs are an integral part of every gathering in a village; perhaps it is here that women feel they can express themselves freely, for they sing about exploitation and pain, and about their hopes and dreams.

One popular song about literacy began: "*Patshallah khula do, maharaj, mera jia pardne ko chahe...*" (Open the school, Maharaj, my heart wants to learn). The women formed a train, likening literacy to a train where many women are left behind as it zooms past. The train picked up more and more women, until the line snaked almost around the entire tent. I saw the MSK enrollment tables on the sides filling up quickly with women and girls who had just determined that they did not want to miss the train. Dancing continued with girls and women coming on stage and uninhibitedly expressing their joy at being where they were, weaving their colorful dupattas through the air as they moved gracefully around the stage.

"Why did you enroll your daughter here?" I asked one father sitting next to me. His name was Madhav Prasad, and he was a thin, frail man somewhat shy about being interviewed and yet at the same time wanting to tell his story and show his pride in his daughter. "I wanted to educate my daughter, and I had no means. When I heard of Mahila Shikshan Kendra, they were like angels." Madhav Prasad had another daughter whom he also wanted to send to MSK. He himself was not educated but he still felt it was important that his children be educated.

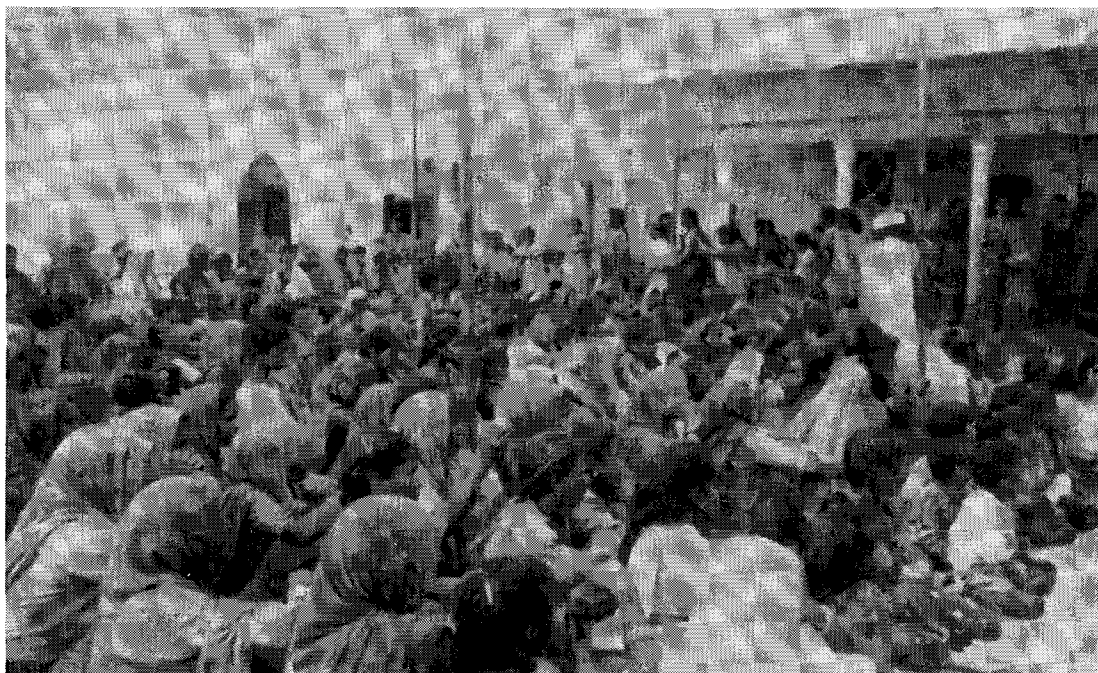
Kavita, his daughter, was 15 years old. She sat down next to me, her purple sari pulled over her head in respect

for her father-in-law, who had also come to attend the ceremony. She had been "promised" in marriage, a practice that often happens as early as 9 or 10 years of age. The girl then stays with her family until she reaches puberty, at which time she is sent to her husband. Kavita seemed to be filled with a new sense of power as she leaned forward in her chair to tell me about her experiences at MSK, her brown eyes big and bright. She was so excited, the words seemed to spill out of her mouth.

"When I first came," she said, "I used to cry all the time. I just wanted to run away and go back home. Now I don't want to go. I've learned so much—about trees and the forest, about food, about the reproductive tract, kidneys, lungs and organs. Did you know your heart is the size of a fist?" she asked excitedly. Her enthusiasm was infectious. When she stopped talking to catch a breath, I quickly slipped in the question that was still on my mind: "How has all of this knowledge made a difference in your life?"

"Didi, I didn't know anything before. I was such a fool. I used to just make my dung cakes and cook food. You know, I even used to think that earthquakes were caused by snakes shaking under the ground! Now I know it's because there are big plates under the earth that move and collide with each other. See, we've even modeled it," she said, leading me over to their earthquake model. On the bottom was a big pot filled with water on top of a stove. Over that were several smaller plates. Over the top of everything was one large plate. When the water boiled, the smaller plates started to move, colliding with each other and causing the big plate above to move. I was amazed at the creativity these women had shown in modeling complicated concepts with simple, available materials.

Kavita led me over to another model, the one that I had seen the previous night, of the Chipko movement. This was a movement in the hills that gained tremendous publicity and has been inspirational to women all over the



Women gather for the MSK celebrations, Karvi, Banda District



Kavita tells others about her experiences at MSK

country. Groups of women banded together and refused to allow private contractors to cut down the trees in their forest, trees that are, as one woman described to me, "as precious as our babies" since they provide women with fuel for cooking, fodder for animals, as well as fruit and medicine. When the contractors refused to go away, hundreds of women came out and hugged the trees, making it impossible for the contractors to fell them. Eventually, the state provided a guarantee to the women that they would not allow the trees to be cut. The MSK model had women, fashioned out of mud, hugging "trees", which were small pieces of tree branches stuck in mud. Learning about Chipko has provided women all over India, including those at MSK, with a model for action, a possibility that even their struggles could be confronted in this way.

On the way back from Banda, we stopped at a village called Raniganj in the stone-quarry area, where Mahila Samakhya had just begun working. A group of *harijan* women welcomed us, girls in their teens carrying babies and old women, their faces lined from years of toil and exploitation, hardened by the sun but softened by dignity and grace. As we arrived, it started raining. We all ran toward the nearest mud hut, the roof so low that we had to bend our necks to stand. It was too small to accommodate all of us, so we sat outside in the rain. Two *charpoy*s (rope beds) were brought out for us to sit on, and those who didn't fit there squatted around us. One woman, in a faded blue sari softened by years of washing, the rain falling on her bare, blouse-less arms, told us that she was earning one and a quarter kilos of cereal as her daily wage for a full day's work in the quarry (approximately equal to Rs. 4 or US\$0.14). Most of these women must either leave their children alone or take them to the field, neither situation

ideal. Alone and in need of the small wages they earn, the women had felt powerless to revolt. Together, however, their power increased. The solidarity of the group that had formed had already helped to bring a sense of hope to these women, showing them that it was possible to change their situations though it would take time and effort. For the first time, working with Mahila Samakhya resource people, they had gone as a group and demanded that their handpump be repaired and it had worked.

Mahila Samakhya works to empower women on several different levels. Small successes of the *harijan* women in getting their handpump fixed showed them that they could band together and fight for their rights. Providing individual self-confidence and a sense of self-worth to girls like Kavita generated enthusiasm and a sense of wonder at how much there is to learn. And, at the broadest level, teaching women about movements such as Chipko provides a community and world context for each woman's individual struggles that extends beyond her own home or village.

Awareness and desire to learn more are absolutely necessary for literacy and education programs to succeed. They are, however, only the first step. While understanding the benefits of MSK's program matters a great deal, it is also important to point out that the women who have graduated from MSK will have to struggle to reconcile their new desire for knowledge with their traditional roles in village life. Kavita told me, for example, that she would now be returning to be with her husband. She would have to continue to do the housework and make dung cakes, but also to try and get more education. If her husband is as supportive as her father was, this may not be difficult. However, there is no question that conflicts will arise that require both the woman and the family to make choices and sacrifices.

These conflicts highlight the need for successful programs like MSK to focus on providing follow-up support for the women who go through their courses. Such follow-up could include specific skills training, further education courses, group empowerment methods, or fighting for basic rights. As both Mehrotra and MSK district coordinator Madhavi Kukreja recognize, six months of education can easily be lost in half that time.

V.S. Naipaul in "India: A Wounded Civilization" describes India as a country in darkness, a people who had always been and would always be serfs to some one else, if not the Mughals, then the British, and if not the British, then the rich. I had read Naipaul's book almost a decade ago, and it angered me to read a description that was so wholly negative, that accorded no respect to India's achievements, that described people's ability to live in their terrible circumstances merely as a "retreat" into the unshakeable certainty of their karma, and that called the poor rural-to-urban migrants "corrupters of the city".

I picked up the book again recently, and found myself angered again by the same things. And yet, I also understood, for the first time, the distress that Naipaul felt that caused him to make such pronouncements. Naipaul lived outside India and yet had pieces of India within himself

that he could not discard, that gave him an emotional attachment to the country that (by his own admission) he constantly fought. The reality of living in the midst of India is that there are two extreme ways to describe, for example, the experience of walking through a slum area where children bathe themselves in filthy green stagnant pools of water, where the shacks have roofs made of any available material—sometimes plastic, sometimes old clothes held down by a broken fragment of a terra-cotta pot—and where the narrow lanes are bordered by open sewers. One can either move into a frenzy of despair, which can easily turn into anger at these people for not making their lot better and disgust at the country for letting conditions deteriorate in this way. Or one can focus on the positive changes that are happening, highlighting instead the courage of the youth group, Ankur, which is working in the slums, the dedication of the school teacher who works despite the fact that the government has not paid her salary in three months, the efforts being made to sweep the streets in the slums, or the hospitality offered to us by each and every family. Either view is valid, and yet incomplete without the other.

I have struggled writing about U.P., feeling myself drawn from one view to another, and hoping that eventually what I write will reflect balance between despair and hope. Development activities in U.P. are not hopeless, as my guesthouse fellow thought. Not all money is wasted, not all activities useless. But it is a place where small activities seem even smaller relative to the magnitude of the state. In my first newsletter, I referred to the fact that effective change seems to take place only at the village level, not on a large-scale. In U.P. this seems to be even more true. The faith that people seemed to have had in Nehru's large government programs in the 1950s after Independence seems to be gone. After all, Nehru had just emerged victor in the fight for India's independence, and carried

the hopes and dreams of many people on his shoulders.

Now, things are different. There is no one issue uniting people, as did nationalism during the 1920s to 1940s. Although there were, even at that time, several princely kingdoms that competed with each other, there was a goal of uniting that was larger than each individual kingdom's interests. Secondly, the country today is much larger than it was then, and a host of problems exist today that did not exist then, such as urban slums, the breakdown of joint family systems, and rural-urban migration. Third, today's political parties are interested in power through divisiveness. They emphasize religious and caste differences, although there is some sign that this splintering will abate as parties realize their dependence on each other to attain majorities in legislature (*i.e.* the BJP/BSP alliance in U.P., or the Shiv Sena/BJP alliance in Maharashtra). Finally, the open corruption of politicians has both eroded people's faith in the political system, and made it almost impossible to implement government programs without dealing with institutionalized corruption.

In U.P. the realities of division and overwhelming size are particularly apparent. Arguments about the need for forced family planning abound, as Government officials and development workers begin to feel suffocated by the multiplying millions. There is no question that development here can sometimes feel like a race against time, like Malthus' exploding "population bomb". However, being drawn into that view has serious consequences for basic human rights (as we have seen in the case of target-driven family planning programs), and I am often drawn back to the Kabir Das quote I used in my first newsletter. Fruits come only in their season, and only with careful watering. Change is coming in U.P., not through rapid, large-scale initiatives, but rather through empowerment on the village level. □



Women learning to write on the wooden backs of old cycle rickshaw seats (Shankergad)