

BODHI TIMES

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We aim sustainably to improve health, education and the environment in developing countries by providing a hook, not a fish. BODHI was founded in 1989 on the principle of skillful, compassionate action and is neither religious nor political. We have supporters and advisers from many faiths. We encourage your ideas and acts of kindness. Realising the interdependence of all beings is in our enlightened self-interest. Now more than ever, if we don't work together to reduce the world's much-discussed problems, then who will?

Ambedkar: Breaking chains of caste

Colin reports on his recent trip to India. We welcome the opportunity to work with this community.

There are more statues in India today of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the great Dalit (preferred to the offensive *untouchable*) leader who died in 1956, than of any other person born in the last millennium, including Mahatma Gandhi, who is so much better known in the West. Ambedkar and Gandhi — contemporaries whose careers often overlapped — were both involved in a great struggle. While Gandhi focussed on freeing India from the grip of colonial Britain, Ambedkar worked mainly to free Dalits from the cruelty and oppression of other Indians, who benefited from the institutional racism and discrimination of the caste system, central to orthodox Hinduism (see box).

Using different methods (which rarely if ever involved Dalits in their formulation), Gandhi also tried to improve the conditions for the millions of people at the bottom of the Indian pecking order. For example, Gandhi used the word *harijan* (children of God) to describe Dalits, hoping this would uplift their position. Ambedkar and most other Dalits rejected this term as offensive and patronising. Rather than lobby for full socioeconomic and political equality, Gandhi argued that the traditional Dalit jobs — such as sweeping, labouring, and removing dead animals from villages — should be regarded by caste Hindus as dignified and honourable. This was seen as absurd by Ambedkar, who instead called for equal opportunity for Dalits to be educated,

nourished and to participate in a fully democratic India, thus extinguishing the very concept of untouchability.

There is evidence that Gandhi — born into the third-ranking merchant caste — absorbed and expressed a psychology which placed Dalits in a lowly position, perhaps in conflict with the mahatma's conscious preference. For example, Gandhi asked a Christian missionary to pray for the harijans but not to try to convert them as they did not have 'the mind and intelligence to understand what you talked. Would you preach the Gospel to a cow?' (1) Many other examples attest to the low regard which Gandhi had for the average 'harijan.' (2)

India's first law minister

Ambedkar matriculated in 1907, an extraordinary achievement for a Dalit. The rarity of this accomplishment does not show any inherent defect in the mental ability of untouchables, but instead reflected their lack of opportunity and educational access. For many, it probably also reflected an environmentally determined loss of cognitive potential, shared by many chronically undernourished people (see page 2).

Ambedkar then earned four post-graduate degrees in the U.S. and UK, including a PhD from Columbia University in New York and a DSc from the London School of Economics. He became the best educated Dalit of his and possibly all time.

From the 1920s until his death Ambedkar personified and led the Dalits in their struggle

for more rights and opportunities. He became integral to the emerging leadership of independent India, not only becoming India's first law minister but also chairing the committee which drafted the Indian constitution.

Ambedkar was far less successful in his attempts to reform Hinduism (as was Gandhi). In 1935 Ambedkar declared that though born a Hindu he would not die a Hindu. Though he considered conversion to Christianity and Sikhism, Ambedkar formally converted to Buddhism in October, 1956. Within months of his untimely death in December of that year, several million Dalits had followed, thus extinguishing — at least in theory — any *religious* obligation to be subservient to higher caste Indians. Today, Buddhists in India who have followed Ambedkar's example outnumber other kinds of Buddhists in India (such as Tibetans) by tens of millions. Yet, their story is hardly known, even among Buddhists in other countries.

This short piece cannot do justice to the complexity and richness of this movement, whose story and struggle is far from complete. We hope to work with this community for many years, and to gradually learn and reveal more about them.

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The caste system

All societies are stratified by birth, gender, wealth, ethnicity, religion and occupation. But the scale, rigidity and codification of the separation between groups in India is without peer - harming, for example, far more people than was the case of black and 'coloured' people in apartheid South Africa.

The Hindu caste system underpins the modern Indian economy, despite some weakening in cities and some states. It allocates occupation and social rank from birth to death and generation to generation. While some of its roots in tropical India lie in public health (eg elaborate rules governing physical contact and the sharing of food) modern knowledge and technology (eg food hygiene and sewerage systems) make this rationale totally obsolete.

Caste discrimination persists in India due to ignorance, inertia and exploitation. Hundreds of millions of more economically powerful Indians benefit from the cheap and subservient labour provided by the Sudras (the lowest of the four main castes), the Dalits (within Hinduism, but outside the four main castes) and animists and tribal people, who also share the floor of the Indian social strata.



Painting of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, photo courtesy David Blundell

Using the poor as shock absorbers

Worrying evidence has emerged in recent months to indicate that extreme weather events are on the rise. These include increasingly powerful and destructive storms, more intense rainfall events and more severe droughts. These events are consistent with current understanding of climate change. In some cases warmer seas and atmospheres facilitate more energetic hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons. In others, wind shifts and changed ocean currents divert drought-breaking rain. Parts of the Amazon are currently experiencing severe drought, as are many areas in Africa. Malawi, Zimbabwe, Somalia and Niger are all famine-struck.

Hurricane Katrina: a glimpse of the future?

The current record-breaking hurricane season in the Caribbean and North Atlantic has seen three category 5 (the strongest) hurricanes. Katrina, Rita and Wilma have severely damaged infrastructure, business and morale, including in the U.S. states of Florida, Mississippi and Louisiana. The tourist 'paradise' in Cancun, Mexico is the latest victim. Wilma recorded the lowest atmospheric pressure ever observed. In July, the Indian city of Mumbai was flooded by more than 1000 millimeters of rain, falling within just a few days. This caused the deaths of more than 1000 people as well as immense discomfort, hardship and chaos.

Most famously, the storm surge and rainfall of Hurricane Katrina breached the poorly maintained levee banks of the city of New Orleans, flooding large parts of this historic city, much of which lies below sea level. Infilling of wetlands also contributed to the damage. If intact, these wetlands would have absorbed some of the storm surge. (The low pressure of these storms temporarily elevates local sea level, effectively creating a partial vacuum which sucks water skyward.) Several oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico were dislodged. Some cost more than U.S.\$1 billion to install. Collectively, the damage from these storms far exceeds that of the world's previous most expensive storm, Hurricane Andrew, in 1992. The global insurance industry, long aware of the risk climate change poses to its financial integrity, must be starting to despair.

Florida has now experienced 7 hurricanes in less than 18 months [as of November, 2005]. Insurance rates are rising sharply, for those able to afford it. However, in New Orleans, the most severely affected people, including the majority of those trapped by floodwaters, were not insured at all. For several days the world watched, amazed and appalled by the inability of the world's richest nation to rescue its own people. But most stranded in New Orleans were black and almost all were poor. Lacking cars, many were unable to escape the storm by driving inland. Public transport in this part of the U.S. is also very patchy. As well, the offer of an Amtrak train to transport refugees was not accepted until it was too late for the train to enter the city.

I hope I am wrong, but I fear that the disproportionate suffering of the poor in New Orleans provides a chilling glimpse of our likely common future: a climate and ecosystem damaged world in which the poor are treated with contempt, becoming the most numerous victims of the growing global environmental crisis. The poor are disproportionately likely to constitute those whose houses and dwellings will be damaged by storms and sea level rise. It is the poor whose health will be most harmed by insufficient food, whether due to drought, flooding, or caprice and mismanagement, as in Zimbabwe. The poor are also most likely to suffer the ill defined 'land sickness' which in some areas (including India) is slowing or even reversing the growth of crop yields. The poor are least likely to be insured and are likely to remain uninsurable. They are also likely to be disproportionately displaced, eventually swelling the numbers of environmental refugees into the tens of millions.

Loss of environmental freedom and growth of authoritarianism

As global consumption and population rise, personal environmental freedom falls. While ample physical space remains for all of us, its quality is declining steeply. Humans leave a diminishing fraction of this space for other species and future generations.

Like all other animal species, *homo sapiens* are territorial, whether as individuals, families, tribes, castes, classes (see BODHI Times #15), nations or coalitions. Reduced environmental space (defined not only as productive land but also as resources of fish, fresh water, oil, wilderness and the waste land which provides a useful boundary) provokes a territorial response. Sometimes, this may occur when the reduction is anticipated rather than actual. Human territorial behaviour manifests as anxiety, posturing or overt violence. As our perception of available environmental space shrinks, so too does our sense and experience of environmental freedom.

Tensions must mount as groups jostle to retain or increase their share of environmental space. The rate of growth of human population and consumption has exceeded the limited capacity of technology (eg by extracting fossil fuel from deep underground or doubling crop yields) to expand the sum of per capita environmental space.

More powerful groups prefer violence to a voluntary reduction in their own share of environmental space. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is the most flagrant and costly example, but numerous less visible also occur, such as the land grabbing and violence against tribal and minority populations in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Assam and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people in the Sudan's Darfur. Separatist movements in the southern Philippines and Thailand have also developed in response to the unwillingness by dominant groups to genuinely share power. More contentiously, Al Qaeda and its

mirror organisations can be considered as self-organising responses to the grotesque blight of global inequality (1).

The decline of environmental freedom has important implications for other forms of liberty. Most of the contraction of each person's use of environmental space will be self-imposed, although at a psychological cost. However, some reductions will be enforced by more powerful groups. This will worsen inequality, resentment, resistance and authoritarianism. In addition to soaring human numbers, other factors contributing to the loss of environmental freedom include accelerating oil depletion, worsening climate change and stubbornly elusive large scale technological fixes.

Using the poor to absorb the shock

Interlocking, systematic factors operate to maintain the relative position and affluence of privileged groups in almost every society. In the past, the robber baron class monopolised political and military power. In many countries, the democratic franchise is now theoretically universal, but inequalities persist: those who are wealthy monopolise the best jobs, the greatest opportunities and the best education for themselves, their friends and their families.

Powerful, well-fed populations in many developing countries use another strategy to maintain their relative position. The evidence that underconsumption of energy-rich food and essential micronutrients (especially iron, iodine and vitamins) harms brain development, learning capacity and physical stamina is overwhelming. Bangladesh and India are two of the worst-affected countries in this regard. The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the U.N. estimates that the loss of the loss of earning potential due to cognitive underdevelopment and nutritionally related fatigue is 8% and 6% respectively of total gross national product in these countries. What is not said but logically follows is that underfed populations, on the whole, are less assertive, more easily manipulated and less capable of organised resistance. What also follows is that some of these people may also be used just as cold-bloodedly to attack those who are more powerful.

The good news

Ultimately, using the poor to absorb the growing shock will fail. Either the poor will strike back or environmental space will decline until even the wealthy are squeezed. Both could happen simultaneously, creating a downward spiral. Using the poor as shock absorbers reduces awareness, among the well-off, of our growing predicament. As a strategy, it is as dangerous and immoral; changing it would be very good news indeed.

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Emerging BODHI health projects

Dalit Health. Colin spent 2 weeks in India in October, 2005, mainly with the Dalits and other followers of Dr. Ambedkar (see page 1). He also attended the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) conference. Most but by no means all of the Dalits who have followed Ambedkar live in the central Indian state of Maharashtra. The dedication and sincerity of the people Colin met and the projects he saw (kindergartens, hostels and training programs) was exceptional. In consequence, BODHI will initially send funds to help to support an existing health clinic that provides services for Dalit slum dwellers in Pune, Maharashtra. The clinic also provides health outreach to nearby Dalit villagers. This work is staffed by a Dalit doctor and several nurses, each of whom could earn far more if they worked in the general community. Major health problems include anaemia, TB and HIV/AIDS.

Chakma health. At the INEB conference Colin also met Ven. Sumanalankar Mahathero, whose development, social and peace work in Khagrachari, in the conflict- and strife-ridden Chittagong Hills District of Bangladesh, is well known. BODHI supporter Padma Chakma and his family (from Canberra, Australia) hope to visit Ven. Mahathero in December, 2005. The indigenous Jhumma people including Chakmas in this part of Bangladesh, face daily harassment and violence from Bengalis who are mostly Moslem and themselves displaced from their plains homeland by poverty and population pressure. Depression and anxiety are particularly common among the Chakmas in this area, for whom insecurity is a daily reality. This is made worse by police and military who consistently fail to apply the law to protect them. We also would like to develop health projects with Chakma schoolchildren, both in Arunachal Pradesh (see last newsletter) and in Bangladesh.

BODHI advisor Shelley Anderson co-nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

The seven women in the International Fellowship of Reconciliation's Women's Peacemaker's Program, which includes BODHI Advisor Shelley Anderson, have been nominated for the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. Although they didn't win (this time), to have her life's work so recognised is a great honour, and helps us all to keep going. Well done, Shelley!

Health in Sikkim. We're still trying to develop a health program at the famous **Rumtek** Monastery, near Gangtok, working to improve the health of monks, including by training some monks in the principles of primary health care. BODHI adviser Dr. Shanti Raman is planning to visit Rumtek Monastery in December. Thanks to Thupten Norbu who, while visiting Gangtok gave a letter to Ven. Dikung Gylsay Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama who has previously expressed support for this project, as has Dr. Kalzang Diki (a doctor of philosophy, not medicine).

Deaf Nepali schoolchildren. We are evaluating a proposal from Dr. Sonal Singh, a Nepali physician working in the U.S. He proposes a train-the-trainer program in Nepal. Dr. Singh writes: 'Three per cent of Nepalis suffer from severe hearing impairment. .. probably because of untreated middle ear infections in children [*editor: probably exacerbated by smoky indoor air and poor nutrition*] ... Deafness is the number one disability in Nepal, with 33% of disabled persons being hearing impaired. ... Nepal has thousands of speech and hearing impaired children, but only one school for them, in Kathmandu. Most children from the villages and mountains drop out due to poverty, before finishing elementary education (class 8-10) — the highest level currently possible for hearing impaired children in Nepal, but which would enable community integration. The project would involve ensuring that at least one child from a remote area completes the whole school. Most such children then teach other hearing-impaired children. More and more deaf people are reaching out to other deaf people. Their goal is to establish a sense of community and worth, and a national sign language.'

Thank you

Response to the last newsletter was a record. Thank you to all, especially this time to:

Dr. Scott Bell, Tasmania, Australia
Dr. Don and Julie Clarke, Tasmania, Australia
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Prof. Pierre Horwitz, Western Australia, Australia
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Dr. Marty and Gail Rubin, California, U.S.A.
Prof. Colin Soskolne, Alberta, Canada
Prof. Yoland Wadsworth, Victoria, Australia
Dr. Sue Wareham, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

Phil Baker of the Clifford Craig Memorial Trust for generously and continually making available his vast fount of fundraising knowledge.

To all the people who helped Colin in his recent visit to India, especially **Mangesh** and **Priyadarshi**.

Thanks to our accountant, **Greg Harper** of Camerons, Launceston, Tasmania, for continuing help in times of need.

We need your help

Thanks to your generosity, BODHI has supported many exciting and innovative projects. To continue, we need your help. Please send your donation, in U.S. or Australian dollars, to an address below. Contact us for details of direct-debit facilities.

Donations by U.S. and Australian tax-payers are tax-deductible

In Australia, cheques must be made out to BODHI Australia Overseas Relief Fund to be tax-deductible

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Holiday gift idea

Susan has written a cookbook called *Midlands Morsels, Favourite Recipes from the Heart of Tasmania (Mostly)*. Part of the profits (and all profits generated from website sales) will go to BODHI. *Midlands Morsels* contains a page about BODHI and its current and past activities. We hope to reach new audiences and media not otherwise accessible.

Please email to purchase this unique gift (\$15 + postage).

John Guillebaud writes from the U.K.:

'I took early retirement from the University College London and the Margaret Pyke Family Planning Centre in 2003, so as to devote more time to what has driven my life for over 40 years: a wake-up call to anyone who will listen:



'That our finite planet CANNOT succeed in providing a city — though it's actually mostly going to be a slum — every 5 days for a million people. Which is exactly what 78 million extra humans a year means ... How can we hope to relieve poverty with so many new poor on top of those already here? And how can there be sustainability, when you think of the environmental impact (including CO₂ production) by 78 extra cities every year? — above all on the habitats for the other species with whom we share this fantastic green planet?

'So that's the CONTENT of my message. I attempt to CONVEY it through my books and articles, through the media, and by frequent lectures anywhere in the world: about birthcontrol methods and services, but crucially also about gender equity and women's choices, rights, opportunities especially for education ... Also through being a regular consultant to WHO and other international bodies on the best use of available contraceptive technology; and by more "political" campaigning via the organisations represented by my own and linked websites, such as:

'www.ecocapsule.com, www.populationsandsustainability.org, www.optimumpopulation.org(OPT), www.peopleandplanet.net and of course www.bodhi.net.au.

'(which please visit for more on what's been happening, eg a great opportunity taken through OPT on 4th October 2005 to speak on 'Home Planet,' the BBC's environment programme).'

Stop press: 1st advisor in India

We are delighted to welcome Dhammachari Lokamitra, of Pune, India, to our advisory board. Dh Lokamitra has worked tirelessly among the Dalit community since the 1970s. More in next newsletter.

Dr. Denis Wright writes from Australia: 'Over the past few years, my research interests have changed from writing about Bangladeshi internal politics and identity to broader social and humanitarian themes across Asia. I have published a number of articles and book chapters on child labour, women and wage labour, globalisation and women's work, migration and trafficking of women and children across Asia. The focus of these studies has been largely South Asian, and sometimes specifically Bangladeshi, but the issue of people trafficking is one that has global dimensions.

'I am presently on study leave from my university (the University of New England), writing a book on women and child trafficking in Asia, and am preparing a conference paper on this theme for a seminar at the University of New England in 2006. My teaching areas remain in Asian cultural and Islamic history. My private interests are in film making and editing, and the full exploitation of the power of computer technology in communications and research.'

Revolving Sheep Bank: Tibet

From the U.S.A.: Prof. Goldstein returned recently from evaluating the first five-year sheep bank trial in Tibet. He writes, 'The sheep bank trial has been a fantastic success. I was really moved as every nomad told me how much they appreciate it and how useful it has been. They get a lot of help from the government but they and their leaders say this hits right at what they really need and has made a real difference. People who got the animals came and said it changed their lives. One person who had the animals taken away as he was trying to sell them, said he is not angry and he made a mistake by doing that. From this year on the one village has animals now coming in permanently. Even those who have not been given any because they are not reliable say if they get a chance in the future they will manage them well.

'So I think we should really try to get more money. The plan I spoke of with the xiang leader was to expand the program to the 5 other village areas under the xiang. I'll send more information soon.'

Many of you love this project and we greatly appreciate your support. However, in order to continue, we need commitments for substantial funds totalling about A\$10,000 per annum. We are exploring ways to raise these funds externally, such as seeking grants from a larger organisation and by finding volunteers who can raise funds dedicated to this project. Thank you John Bell of Devonport, Tasmania for your enthusiastic and generous support.

Chakma education: NE India

Permission was received by the Indian government for the Chakmas to receive BODHI's donation as this went to press. We've transferred funds and hope to have a progress report soon.

Some of Colin's publications and presentations since the last newsletter (available on website: Hot Topics)

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- Emerging health threats. 6th Global Health Promotion Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, August, 2005.
- Ecology and vulnerability: using the poor to absorb the shock. INEB meeting, Buddhism and Social Equality, Nagpur, India, October 2005.