

Overview

The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation continued to punch above its weight. The Foundation's projects were to be found right across the country – from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the far southeast, from Gujarat in the west to Manipur and Mizoram in the east.

Our activities during the year were diverse. In Jammu and Kashmir our focus remained squarely on children – improving the quality of school education and helping children in many different ways to realise their creative potential; in Rajasthan it was water conservation and better local governance of natural resources; in Uttaranchal, aromatic plants, biodiversity protection and scientific vegetable cultivation; in eastern Uttar Pradesh, women's self-help groups, health awareness and the elimination of child labour; in Jharkhand, income generation for women; in Orissa, community-led programmes of sanitation and clean water; in Manipur, organic ginger cultivation and its processing; in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, training in food processing for women; in the slums of Hyderabad and Jogeshwari (Mumbai), the education of the Muslim girl child; in Kerala, the imparting of vocational skills to disabled women; in Delhi and Mumbai, raising HIV/AIDS awareness among slum dwellers and sex-workers; in Gujarat, the welfare of children orphaned by the communal riots of 2002; in Madhya Pradesh and Haryana, the rehabilitation of street children; in Karnataka and Assam, village libraries; in Andhra Pradesh and Nagaland, support for children orphaned by terrorism.

This brief snapshot does not, of course, do justice to the full extent of our presence.

Our village and slum libraries programme reaches as many as 21 states, and continues to grow in numbers and quality. The hundreds of children orphaned by terrorism whom we support are scattered across 8 states, yet we keep in touch with them all in a personal way. Our tsunami-related programmes, motorized tri Wheeler awards to the orthopaedically challenged, training of medical practitioners of Indian systems of medicine in the syndromic management of sexually transmitted infections, to name a few others, are all multi-state in scope.

We responded with speed and concern to yet another natural disaster – the earthquake in Jammu and Kashmir in October 2005. RGF was among the first to rush 30,000 blankets, medical and other supplies to the affected areas. Our staff joined our local partners, the Help Foundation and the Human Aid Society, in the arduous task of identifying and making sure that our supplies reached the neediest. The Foundation also took the initiative in getting children back to school, providing them with school bags, books and stationery as well as involving them in a series of creative activities to ease their trauma. The Foundation's efforts won it much appreciation in the state.

The big disappointment of the year was the failure of the Red Ribbon Express to get going. This RGF idea was an imaginative response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS, designed to raise countrywide awareness of a pandemic that could inflict much suffering and seriously retard India's economic prospects. The Foundation was involved in a considerable amount of preparatory work for the venture but protracted negotiations between the

National Aids Control Organisation and the Ministry of Railways dragged on inconclusively. With India emerging as the country with the largest number of HIV-infected people in the world, one must hope that these differences will be resolved quickly and that the Red Ribbon Express will roll out in the near future.

Our most significant new initiative was on the important issue of sanitation. India remains a laggard, with a daunting sanitation deficit. A South Asia Regional Workshop brought together about 60 leading activists and experts from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. The sharing of cross-country experience was specially valuable. Bangladesh, for example, offers as many as 16 different types of low-cost sanitation technologies, and has made greater progress than India on the sanitation front. Everywhere, sanitation success has been critically dependent on women. As the main custodians of family health, their energies need to be harnessed in a sustained way. One of the women panchayat leaders at the workshop stressed the need for a far greater educational effort to make people more aware of the link between hygiene, sanitation and health. Once this was understood, old habits became easier to change. In her own village, for example, people were now convinced that spending Rs 5000 on a toilet was cheaper than incurring repeated expenditure on doctors and medicines to treat illnesses caused by lack of sanitation. The workshop was unanimous that official programmes gave woefully inadequate attention to hygiene education – the software component of sanitation – and focused instead on supply-driven, top-down sanitation hardware and technology. Much of this

was often inappropriate, resulting in toilets which could not or would not be used. Creating demand was the key to sanitation success; and this in turn required community involvement based on an understanding of the continuum between sanitation, clean water and good health. NGOs could play a vital bridging role but felt pushed to the margins.

Jawaharlal Nehru observed long ago that India would be a developed country only when all homes had a toilet. The latest Human Development Report sheds light on why sanitation improvements are so critical – for protecting children from disease, lifting people out of poverty, boosting economic growth and employment, and giving people pride in their homes and communities.

While RGF has now joined other civil society groups in seeking changes in government policy, designed to mobilize political will and to give women and NGOs greater institutional recognition and support in national sanitation programmes, the Foundation also entered the field by extending support to the rural health and environment movement in parts of Orissa. Gram Vikas, its local partner, has done truly remarkable work in hundreds of poor tribal villages in that state. The transformation that has been achieved through 100 per cent sanitation coverage must be seen to be believed: I for one have not seen anything comparable elsewhere in the country in terms of community involvement and benefits. In helping Gram Vikas to increase the momentum of its work, RGF is involved in an important learning process of the ground realities as well as of the roadblocks to progress and how they might be overcome.

The Foundation made encouraging headway on another important initiative – the promotion of child-and-learning-friendly school buildings, in which architectural elements are consciously used to help children grasp abstract



Kashmir: Creative activities to ease earthquake trauma

concepts and stimulate their curiosity. With the help of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, which was quick to grasp the potential of the idea for the huge Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) school buildings programme, a number of states – notably Jammu and Kashmir and Karnataka – have received our help in orienting and training their SSA engineers and teachers. They have welcomed these new approaches and a pilot buildings programme will soon be under way.

Among our distinguished visitors this year were Nobel Laureate Prof. David Gross of the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics, Santa Barbara, who delivered the annual Rajiv Gandhi Science & Technology Lecture on the 'Future of Physics', and Ms. Liz Mohn, Vice-Chair of the Bertelsmann Foundation with whom we jointly organized an India-Europe cultural dialogue.

Three years ago we launched a capital funding campaign to offset the effects of inflation and declining interest rates. The response has been encouraging and on 31 March 2006 our income-yielding assets had increased to Rs 54 crores. But we are still far short, in real terms, of the level of

income we enjoyed in 1998. We will need to persevere if the Foundation is to meet the expectations which attended its establishment. Our grants may be relatively small, but our procedures are simple, access to us is easy, and decisions are quick, qualities which our NGO partners value. Our corpus needs to grow substantially if RGF is to make a bigger impact on the many national challenges it is addressing.

The year was marked by a double sadness — the passing away of Dr. Kamla Chowdhry and Dr. I.G. Patel. As a Trustee, Kamlaji brought much wisdom and dedication to the Board's deliberations. It was at her instance that RGF began its work on the issue of women and sanitation, a cause that was specially dear to her heart. Dr. I.G. Patel, as a member of the Governing Council of the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, gave the Institute insights and ideas which were of inestimable value. They will both be greatly missed.

M. Malhoutra

Manmohan Malhoutra
Secretary-General