

Leaders' Corner

The groups in India that are at the forefront of positive social change are led by people of great vision, character and dedication. IFA is fortunate to have interacted with many of them. We requested some of them to write a few words about how IFA support has mattered to their work and what if any message they have for our community here.

Madhu Purnima Kishwar (Manushi Sangathan, Delhi)

Madhu, the founder and editor of Manushi, was the featured speaker at the 2001 Annual IFA Forum

The support given by the IFA to **Manushi** in the form of life subscriptions has been very valuable since Manushi has relied mainly on subscriptions and individual donations for running not just the journal but also a whole range of activities (research, investigations, legal aid, advocacy for policy reform as well as activist interventions). Foreign subscriptions, especially foreign life subscriptions, have played an important role in **Manushi's** survival and have helped generate a small surplus for the above-mentioned work.



The new \$10,000 IFA grant this year is vital for consolidating our work with street vendors, which includes policy reform at the local and national level and executing a series of demonstration projects by creating model markets for street vendors. This will help us pay the salaries for two staff members handling this work as well as complete a new film on street vendors, which is intended to be used as an instrument of advocacy with the government as well as for mobilizing public opinion in favor of a liberalized licensing regime for street vendors.

The first film we made on the plight of street vendors and rickshaw pullers has played a vital role in formulation of a new National Policy for Street Vendors. However, the policy is not being implemented with any seriousness. In fact, assaults on street vendors by municipal agencies have increased. At least three vendors in three different cities immolated themselves in recent months to protest against the large-scale clearance operations under the garb of cleaning cities.

Therefore, it is important to document on film the increased attacks on street vendors, which are causing grievous economic distress and demoralization among street traders. However, the film should also carry a message of hope and we will document the few positive developments that have taken place after the National Policy was announced, including an account of Manushi's Model Market for street vendors, which has survived serious onslaughts. We already have a substantial amount of footage for the film. The IFA funds will be used for some additional shooting and professional editing. By providing an insight into economic benefits and politics of self governance represented by the Model Market, we hope to build a strong public lobby in favor of implementing this model which shows how vendors can be made an integral part of the city economy in an aesthetic and orderly manner as well as become a source of income for the fund starved Municipal Corporations.

Manushi is also planning to organize a National Public Hearing of street vendors from different parts of the country on May 10, 2006. On this day last year a vendor in Lucknow committed suicide to protest against removal operations. This Public Hearing in Delhi will be organized in collaboration with two other organizations that are also engaged in fighting for the rights of street vendors.

The increasing tendency in India to depend mainly on foreign aid and grants for work in the social sector conveys a very negative message that Indians are incapable of taking care of their own people and affairs. IFA support for strengthening the rights of the poor and vulnerable sections of our society, coming from fellow Indians, enhances our self-confidence and self esteem as an organization.

Jayaprakash Narayan (National Coordinator, Lok Satta and Vote India, Andhra Pradesh)

JP was the featured speaker at the 2002 Annual IFA Forum and spoke to us again in 2004



One of the great strengths contemporary India enjoys is the expatriate community. As is rightly said, you can take an Indian out of India, but you cannot take India out of an Indian. True to this adage, the overseas Indians, endowed with skills and exposed to the ways of successful societies are making a valuable contribution to Indian democratic reform, social progress and economic growth. IFA's support to Lok Satta for the past three years has been of great value not merely in monetary terms, but in terms of the flexibility and empathy. Lok Satta is a vast grassroots movement for political and governance reforms. In work of this kind, it is hard to always link the support with output, and even harder to link with outcomes. IFA has been very understanding, patient and sensitive to these somewhat unusual requirements of a democratic reform movement. Such support makes it easy to sustain the key volunteers who work tirelessly to mobilize public opinion, train active citizens, launch a variety of campaigns and prepare the local communities for citizen assertion.

India is on the verge of a rapid transformation. Economic growth is robust; confidence is growing; the youth are ambitious and hard working; and technology, transparency, competition and choice are bringing down corruption in several sectors. The opportunities for the nation seem real and huge. But there are great challenges too: The political process is fuelling corruption and arbitrariness; rule of law is in disrepair; inequalities are growing; the poor and disadvantaged are paying a very heavy price on account of unfulfilled potential and bearing the burden of avoidable suffering; regional imbalances are getting sharper; and poor governance is impeding the growth. In many ways, what we do to reshape our politics and governance will determine future of our economy and society for at least a generation. Therefore, enlightened support groups like IFA can focus on governance, institutional improvements for better delivery of healthcare and education, adoption of innovative practices to accelerate growth and prosperity, and bringing in the best talent into the challenges of the future. Strategic inputs in crucial areas have a disproportionate impact on the evolution of our polity.

I am sure IFA, with its energy, dynamism, passion, and collective wisdom is well placed to play an important role in this exciting process of transformation of India.

Sandeep Pandey (Asha Parivar, UP)

Magsaysay award winner Sandeep Pandey was the featured speaker at the 2005 Annual IFA Forum



IFA started supporting Asha's work in Right to Information (RTI) and Right to Food (RTF) areas when we were in our second year of activities in these areas. There was no institutionalized support available to Asha at that point in time. IFA's support was crucial in supporting three activists who played an important role in RTI and RTF, which saw Asha grow from a handful of activists and few villages to a mass organization Asha Parivar. Today Asha Parivar's work has expanded to four Blocks of Hardoi District in UP and Asha has become a hope for the poor and marginalized people of this area. The work in the areas of RTI and RTF has had a tremendous empowering impact on people and has prepared them to play a more participatory role in the democracy. Besides, by checking corruption in schemes which impact the lives of poor people, this movement has come as a breath of fresh air for such sections of society who do not see much hope elsewhere. We will remain grateful to IFA for the valuable support provided by it, which has strengthened the grassroots movement for democracy. In fact, IFA's support has enabled Asha Parivar to extend its activities beyond Hardoi District into two other Districts of UP - Deoria and Chandauli. What we like about IFA is the total freedom it allows the people supported by it to determine their role in social transformation. It is very understanding and sensitive and plays a wonderful role of a support group to the activists on the ground. This character of IFA can be attributed to its truly large hearted volunteers.

Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Rajasthan)

Magsaysay award winner Aruna Roy was the featured speaker at the 2004 Annual IFA Forum

The IFA Fellowship Programme is an important support system through which networks and campaigns in India can receive specific assistance.

Over the last decade India has seen the growth of important new citizens groups and networks which have worked around single issues, or have coordinated a campaign around particular issues. They broadly represent a voluntary coming together of grass root groups and active individual citizens, and draw into their fold lawyers, media persons, academics, and other urban based professionals interested in supporting such causes. These campaigns perform a number of important tasks from advocacy for strong legislation, to fact finding, media advocacy and organizing networking meetings, conventions and workshops. Because of their voluntary and non-funded character, and their own need to maintain independence, they operate on a shoestring budget with skeletal staff and little infrastructure. This gives such groups a high degree of credibility, and the capacity to pursue controversial issues. Nevertheless their potential, is often not fully realized because of the shortage of people who can work full time to perform certain tasks. These tasks could be updating campaign websites, bringing out newsletters, communicating through letters and e-mails, media advocacy, providing documentation and research support. Often, the talent of the many volunteers these campaigns attract, are not properly used because of a lack of a full time person to bring the efforts together.



By offering fellowships to two such full time volunteers- based in Delhi and Jaipur –for the RTI Campaign, IFA has taken an important step towards meeting this need. These modest fellowships render great support by facilitating activists living in urban India to meet their living expenses, while performing these tasks in a comprehensive and committed manner. The experience so far with these fellowships, has been positive with a potential to build on it further.

Ravi Chopra (President, People’s Science Institute, Uttarakhand)

IFA comes as close to an ideal funding agency as I have ever dealt with. You work hard to pick first rate activists or organizations to fund. The effort made by IFA members to personally get to know potential donees is a critical element in this process. It requires a lot of time and most donor agencies are not willing to make that investment. In my own work I have learnt that picking the right person usually means that half the work is done. Similarly, “responding to felt needs” is a developmental ideal. Most funders, however, push their own agendas, straitjacketing grantees in the process. IFA on the other hand is willing to listen to the needs expressed by people or their representative organizations and respond to them. Lastly, you dare to experiment with ideas. Many donors are keen to see quick and tangible results and thus focus on the physical capital of a community or a society – roads, wells, houses, clinics, schools, etc. You are willing to work on the development of human and social capital as well. This is often riskier and thus only mature donors have the courage to take this risk. I guess your choice of the grantees’ calibre encourages you to take this risk. One word of caution is that experiments must at least generate knowledge. Knowledge is more important than results. Results can be positive or negative, but they must deepen our understanding of the problems we are trying to overcome.



Having set up similar organizations of development-sensitive Indians in the USA in the past, I know that usually a few persons shoulder much of the burden. So the challenge is to continue to identify sensitive–likeminded persons who are willing to share the burden so that the good work can grow.

“Small is beautiful!” You have a good business model. I can only say, “stick with it – expand it, deepen it, but change it only if you have to.

Padmashree Dr. H Sudarshan (Karuna Trust, Karnataka)

Dr. Sudarshan has spoken to IFA members twice, in 2002 and again in 2006

The Vivekananda Girijana Kalyan Kendra (VGKK) is a 25-year-old organization involved with integrated tribal development through health, education, livelihoods and biodiversity conservation of tribals. The IFA supports a critical component of the education and livelihoods initiative - the Job-oriented Course (JOC) in Forestry for tribal boys and girls who have completed their 10th standard. The syllabus was designed in consultation with many experienced foresters, scientists, tribal leaders and environmentalists. The students learn about identification and mapping flora and fauna in addition to the concepts in environmental sciences and the basics of forestry. The program is run by professionally trained faculty including tribals. The course is now in its 4th year and has produced over 60 tribals trained in forestry. Many of them have been employed by the Forest Department. Some have joined eco-tourism enterprises. VGKK is now planning a 'sustainability initiative' by building a Model Eco-tourism enterprise owned and run by this team of forestry trained tribal youth.



Karuna Trust, a rural development organization affiliated to VGKK, is running Primary Health Centers (PHCs) in Karnataka and Arunachal Pradesh in partnership with the respective State Governments. Dr. Prithvi Sharma and Dr. Surekha Sharma from IFA visited the PHCs in Arunachal Pradesh and witnessed the services rendered to the tribal people in remote and inaccessible areas. We are grateful to the generous and timely contributions from IFA towards this tribal health project. I am deeply impressed by the concern and the commitment of the IFA team for the poor people of India. The participatory approach and the personal involvement of the IFA members in the development of people, in partnership with committed Voluntary Organizations in India, is model for all funding institutions.

SR Hiremath (Samaj Parivartan Samudaya, Karnataka)

SR has lead this vital people's movement since the 1980s. He spoke to the IFA members in February 2006



We in SPS are very happy about partnership with IFA that began during my visit to USA early in 2006 and the subsequent meeting with the IFA members organized by our young friend Jayaram. I was touched by the fact that IDS Chicago, a group that I was closely associated with as a founder in the 1970s, had inspired/been a motivation for starting IFA.

The support of IFA for our grassroots work in the Kumaranahalli cluster (Harapanahalli Taluka, Davanagere Dist) especially for the effective implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2005, has led to empowerment of the poor by providing badly needed drinking water for the cattle and sheep during summer months and by the increased underground water level for drinking and lifesaving irrigation in this semi arid drought prone area. Equal wages for men and women at minimum wage of Rs.69 per day has led to better economic and social conditions. As a result, urban migration from this area has dropped to almost zero. The work of SPS in Nichhavvanahalli Gram Panchayat is being expanded to 8 other villages.

The visit of Prithvi and Surekha in Nov 2006 to SPS area and the two-day meet in Bangalore, have further helped in IFA and SPS coming closer as partners with a shared vision. The subsequent meetings in Dehra Doon (1/07) and Ranchi (2/07) have led to the launching of the second phase of 'Azadi se Swaraj' campaign. These hold good potential for our working together on the issues of Community Control over natural resources (*jal, jungle, jameen, khaneej*), Self rule (empowerment of Gram Sabhas and other Panchayati Raj Institutions) and opposition to the present economic policies leading to a more humane development path.

Jagadish Pradhan (President, Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan, Orissa)

SVA has been a leader in the indigenous people's struggles under the Jungle Bachao Andolan in Orissa

The moral and financial support of IFA for the various activities of Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan have been a great source of encouragement for the workers and volunteers of SVA for the past several years. Whether it is the Kankadajore Irrigation Project displaced people in Bolangir or the tribals living in the Sunabeda wild life Sanctuary, their struggles would not have continued with such strong determination without the moral support of IFA. Of course the fellowships provided to fourteen social activists since 2004 have significantly contributed towards building a strong movement of the forest dwellers in Western Orissa. It also helped SVA successfully spearhead the campaign at state level as part of the National Campaign for Survival and Dignity, which led to the enactment of the Central Act (December 2006) recognizing the rights of forest dwellers. The efforts of our social activists have resulted in rehabilitation of 640 households that had been displaced by the Kankadajore Minor Irrigation Project in Bolangir district and have paved the way for land settlement for over 4500 tribal families in Kalahandi, Bolangir, Bargarh and Nuapada districts.



SVA members look at I.F.A. (through Dr. P. Sharma and Dr. Surekhajee) as co-travelers who could be approached at any time for assistance and indeed they have come forward with such support at many crucial times. Apart from providing financial support, IFA has facilitated linkage with other social activists and movements on similar issues. The periodic visits of Dr. Sharma also create an opportunity for us to reflect on our work from a broader/Global perspective. This has become quite helpful now since India and particularly states such as Orissa, are moving very fast along the path of Globalization and economic Liberalization.

Most of the funding agencies do come with their own agenda and very often end up co-opting the local organizations and movements. Some donor agencies even become instrumental in disintegration of the local movements. But IFA has been playing a role in bring about solidarity among local movements and social activists and thereby in strengthening local organizations.

Arvind Kejriwal (Parivartan, Delhi)

2006 Magsaysay award winner, Arvind was the featured speaker at the 2006 IFA Forum



I have known IFA through Prithvi and Surekha for the last four years. They visit Parivartan every year. When I visited IFA in October 2006, I was really impressed and amazed to see the deep concern amongst its members about the state of affairs in India, particularly the governance. Everyone wants to see a just and prosperous India and for this they are willing to do whatever they can.

For the last many years, they have been supporting several individuals and groups who are working at the grassroots level. Right to Information (RTI) has created a lot of hope for a better future amongst ordinary citizens in India. Earlier, people used to feel completely helpless while dealing with various government agencies. Not any more. Those who know how to use

RTI are challenging injustice, bribery and corruption. This hope is inspiring many young individuals to give up their careers and jobs to become RTI activists – to use and to spread RTI. They do not have any constant source of income to support themselves. They need to be supported. For IFA, supporting RTI has come naturally.

IFA has supported many such individuals in different parts of India such as in Orissa, Delhi etc. Each of these individuals is acting as a catalyst in their respective geographical areas. Information Commissions have a critical role to play in implementing RTI. However, their performance so far has come in for severe criticism. IFA has recently supported an advocate to challenge all the bad orders of Information Commissioners in the Courts. This will be very crucial in saving RTI.