

Secretary's Report for SANSAD AGM 2004, June 13

The past year has felt extremely busy—and I have been told that we were doing a lot of things—but when I start to gather together what we have done, it doesn't seem very much after all. Perhaps that is a good sign: it tells us that there is a lot to do and we should be doing more.

We had our AGM on July 12 last year, so we are one month ahead this year, meeting after 11 months. Our year seems to be bound by the affairs of Nepal, whether it be that our vision is guided by our able treasurer, Abi Ghimire, or that the situation in Nepal is of critical interest for democracy in South Asia. We held an educational forum on Nepal on June 29, 2003, just before our AGM, and we are holding another Public Forum on Nepal on June 19, 2004, shortly after our AGM. I won't say anything more about this meeting next Saturday: you have all seen the leaflet we produced and have been circulating and you have also received a copy of the article I wrote on the situation in Nepal for the South Asian papers. Please take some copies of the leaflet with you and encourage people to come to the meeting. Let's begin the year with a successful event.

We began the year with a very important public meeting, "India and Pakistan: Fascism, Fundamentalism, and the U.S. Agenda," at the Justice Institute on August 24. Our speakers were Ms Teesta Setalvad, editor of Communalism Combat, from Bombay, Mr. Tapan Bose, Secretary, South Asian Forum for Human Rights, Kathmadu, and Dr. Bilal Hashmi, Professor Emeritus, Eastern Washington University. Nissar Dalal, who, unfortunately had to withdraw from the Board because of personal demands, chaired this meeting with great success. We shall miss Nissar. People who came to the meeting were largely enthusiastic, and we had a warm and lively get together after the meeting, at which several of SANSAD's supporters pledged their financial support for our work.

In October, 03, we arranged a meeting with Guru Ravidas Sabha with our visiting friend, Vithal Rajan, through Jai Birdi, Anup Jhalli and the Chetna Society. Vithal Rajan made an inspiring presentation on the work he has been doing in Andhra among the Dalits, exciting us particularly with the project of establishing primary schools for the children of latrine workers in order to enable them to enter the mainstream schools. We decided as a Board to support this project and set up a committee to explore the ways of raising the necessary funds for funding one school at the cost of \$3000.00 per annum. We regret, however, that the committee discovered that we were not in a position to raise the necessary funds with any security for the 3 year period that we considered necessary for a pilot project. We have had to accept this failure but have recognized that in order to undertake such worthy projects we need to set up a charitable foundation. A committee of the Board is engaged in preparing the documents for such a foundation.

On November 15 we held a pot-luck social with the showing of "Swara", a documentary on the practice of substituting a woman for blood money in order to stop serial revenge killing of men in feuds within tribes of the North West Frontier Province. The film was

brought from Pakistan by Nageen, who introduced it. Following the film, there was a lively discussion, suggesting this to be a valuable format for educational activity. Two women, Benita Singh and Aisha Syed, who are engaged in a human rights complaint against Starbucks, were present with their lawyer, and gave a detailed account of their case, with which SANSAD has been involved.

On March 13 we organized an educational forum titled “ Toward Understanding Political Islam,” at the Palestinian Community Centre. The forum was held because we had received a request for support for an international petition titled “Say No to Political Islam,” and felt that the issue was very important and required our studied response. We had an excellent panel of speakers: Dr. Hassan Gardezi, Dr. Taj Hashmi, Mr. Aziz Khaki, and Ms. Itrath Sayed. There was an extremely lively discussion following the presentations. The meeting was handled with great efficiency by Zahid.

In the month of May we co-sponsored the showing of South Asian documentaries organized by Asian Heritage Month. We thank Imtiaz, who coordinated this program and Abi, who facilitated the availability of the films. The films were of excellent quality and should have been seen by more people. We should explore the possibility of acquiring some of them for future showing because they have enormous educational value. On May 8 SANSAD organized a panel following the showing of Godhra Tak.

We have been engaged in two activities that are still on going. We decided early in the year that we would undertake a campaign against the exploitative practices of the Coca Cola Company in India in collaboration with the similar campaign in Columbia. We produced a leaflet on this issue though we were not able to proceed beyond it to produce the more elaborate pamphlet that would be necessary for the work. Harjap has been active on this issue and has established links with other people in the city who are engaged in it. We should not drop this matter but should rather follow through with the plans we had made and elaborate them in cooperation with other organizations. I would request Harjap to bring us up to date on this matter.

The other on-going activity is the matter of Starbucks and the nose studs. We have met several times with Benita Singh and Aisha Syed and their lawyer, offered suggestions regarding people they might contact as expert witnesses, and written a brief in their support. We have also produced a leaflet soliciting support for Benita and Aisha that we plan to distribute at various locations and are working on an on-line petition to Starbucks to make their dress code culturally non-discriminatory. Sydia is also collecting stories from women who wore nose studs before immigrating to Canada but felt it necessary to remove them when they came here.

We have intervened on several occasions by open letter and news release. We issued a statement on the bombings in Mumbai in September 03 and the arrests of thousands of demonstrators agitating for democracy in Nepal in April 04. We have also issued a statement on “political Islam.” Some of our interventions have been close to home, involving members of the Board. Imran Munir, who was returning from a stay in Pakistan via the U S, was detained and harassed at the airport: we wrote a letter of protest to the

American Consulate, which was forwarded by an indignant supporter in the U S to his senator. Zahid and Hari were denied visas by the Indian Consulate in Vancouver, and we wrote an open letter of protest against this. We have also received a series of harassing letters and threatening phone calls attempting to silence us and have issued a statement on the matter, which has received wide circulation.

In purely internal matters, our most significant achievement has been the establishment of a group of supporters who have committed themselves to sustaining our work with a donation of \$100.00 annually. We raised approximately \$2000.00 by this means and should try to increase the amount. We thank Abidbhai for his initiative in this matter.

We have a logo and new stationary with the logo. We thank Harjap for the design and Sunil Sharma for help with the stationary. Harjap has also created a design for the banner that you can see in the new banner behind me.

A great deal of our time has gone into attending various activities in supporting capacity. We have attended several demonstrations against the occupation of Iraq. We have also attended Amnesty International's fast for the disappeared in Kashmir. We have supported the Peace and Justice Committee of the Vancouver City Council in their proposal for a World Peace Forum in 2005, and we have participated regularly in the meetings of stopwar.ca, which has been organizing the protest against the occupation of Iraq in Vancouver. Our members have been active in the Bus Rider's Union, South Asian Youth Alliance, No One is Illegal, and anti-poverty organizations. They have been very energetic and achieved considerable success. We thank Kirat, Jagdeep, Harjap, and Imtaz for keeping us engaged on so many fronts and linked with other activists in town. We also thank Harsha Walia, who has been sitting on the Board as a guest for her intense activity on behalf of refugees and deportees.

Our Board has had to cope with some internal problems. Two of our members resigned: one because of what he perceived as a conflict with another member of the Board and another for personal reasons. We reluctantly accepted their resignations after due attempt to overcome the difficulties. Two other members have been on leave of absence because of their time constraints.

The Board has had a more exciting life than this outline of activities indicates. There has been a flood of information and requests for intervention and there have been many intense and prolonged debates. If we didn't have e-mail we would have unending meetings suitable only for the other world down below. But we have dealt with these matters electronically, so that our meetings have been limited to 3 hours. We have maintained this discipline thanks to the able chairmanship of our Vice President Abidbhai.

There is a lot of work ahead. The sign of an effective organization is that it always faces an increasing workload, and I think we have reached that stage. With so many of us working in so many areas, there is always more work than we can handle. Let's have an

even more effective year. Let's bring more people in to share the work and let's raise more money so that we can do more.

Chin Banerjee
Secretary
SANSAD

Additions by Hari Sharma:

1. We have had a supportive relationship to the Chetna Association, and through them to the struggles of Dalits of India, and the Dalits living here. This support has remained a constant feature, since three persons associated with Chetna Assoc. (Jai, Anup and Jagdeep) have been on our Board.
2. SANSAD was represented, through its president's invited participation, in two major, international conferences, organized by the South Asian Muslims living in the USA. One was in New York city, and the other in San Jose, California. Both conferences focused on the plight of Muslims and other minorities in India, especially after the state-sponsored pogroms in Gujarat.
3. SANSAD is also represented in International League of People's Struggles (ILPS), a broad-based anti-imperialist organization, with head offices in Holland. SANSAD president was one of the main speakers at a Conference organized by ILPS in Montreal in May 2004, focusing on the global implications of the US-led "war on terrorism" - especially on the anti-imperialist struggles waged in the Phillipines and elsewhere.
4. We have also been engaged in improving our website. Nawaz Soomro has constructed a design for it and a committee has been appointed to flesh it out.

Additions by Harjap Grewal:

The South Asian Youth Alliance, outside of supporting SANSAD work, was engaged in a variety of activities involving several different local and international issues. SAYA has been involved with issues of Youth Violence in Immigrant Communities working in solidarity with members of the Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance after the brutal killing of a Filipino youth in Vancouver and helped organize Youth of Colour Consultation Against Systemic Racism. Additionally, SAYA was involved in organizing opposition to the Israeli Consulate General speaking at SFU and defending the Muslim Students Association after they were targeted by the University for the actions of that day. SAYA members also attended and have been closely following the development of opposition to the

IWA executive and supported some of the rank and file actions. The group sponsored one of the Film South Asia Screenings during Asian Heritage Month. SAYA has also supported the campaigns of several other community organizations including a victory for the Bus Riders Union for their Campaign for the Night Owl Buses. Finally, SAYA hosted a screening of the movie "In the Memory of Friends" during the Mayworks Festival which was followed by a lively discussion, an event which was perhaps one of the best attended events of the festival.