

## **SOWING SEEDS FOR THE PROSPERITY OF INDIA**

### **MANU GUPTA, INDIA**

While at college pursuing graduate studies in city planning, Manu Gupta established the Sustainable Environment and Eco Development Society (SEEDS), a volunteer group of professionals in the field of urban planning, along with two of his friends. In India at that time, environmental issues were not yet addressed in conventional city planning, and the SEEDS founders hoped to apply classroom-based knowledge directly to real-life situations.

The organization decided to focus on natural disaster management since over six percent of India's population, equivalent to about 56.5 million people, is directly affected by natural disasters annually, and data reveals that there has been a fivefold increase in the number of disasters in the last three decades. While floods are the most frequent disasters, cyclones are the most intensive, causing the greatest loss of life. Fifty-six percent of India is also susceptible to earthquakes and many parts of the country also suffer from landslides and drought.

Acknowledging that natural disasters are of concern to all humanity, the United Nations declared the decade 1990–2000 as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), and the IDNDR secretariat has been actively promoting disaster reduction as the key to sustainable development.

Together with IDNDR, SEEDS has been working directly alongside poor, vulnerable communities, equipping them with the necessary skills to face natural hazards, increase awareness of safety measures and facilitate citizens' participation in action at the local level.

Mr. Gupta comments: "While technological advances and extensive work carried out at research institutes have made it theoretically possible to mitigate the effect of disasters on communities, the benefits of such research seldom trickle down to the communities themselves. Therefore, SEEDS has introduced a program to make communities aware of the newest disaster prevention measures against earthquakes and flood threats, early response to cyclone warnings and fire safety. It is also sharing information at national and international forums in an attempt to shape disaster prevention and mitigation policy."

Initially, SEEDS had very limited financial support for its activities, and its members regularly contributed their monthly scholarship funds, which they received in college. Since the work gave them tremendous satisfaction and joy, the founders were not interested in pursuing more lucrative jobs in the corporate sector.

Mr. Gupta looks back on the organization's struggle to establish itself with a feeling of accomplishment: "At first, SEEDS was shunned by the scientific community because of its NGO status and because it was viewed as an advocate for the community. This only pushed us to redouble our efforts. After a few early rejections, we were able to make presentations at many scientific and technical seminars, and gradually we gained the recognition of the scientific community."

In a very short time, SEEDS has gained recognition, including awards and commissions, from many universities and national and international organizations.

It has also been receiving a positive response from the community. "Reducing Urban Risk, India," an ongoing project being carried out in two communities in Delhi, has received an especially encouraging response. The program, which has helped strengthen community-based organizations and foster unity in dealing with disasters, has been quoted as a case study in many national and international forums.

Following the severe cyclone on the western coast of India in June of 1998, SEEDS assist-

ed in relief distribution and provided an independent appraisal of the disaster to the government. Recently, during the earthquake that struck Chamoli, the SEEDS team, among the first to reach the affected area, prepared a report on relief needs.

Although SEEDS is functioning efficiently at present, Mr. Gupta says that its initial efforts lacked clear focus. He recalls, "We would take up environmental issues from a very wide perspective and often end up in deadlock." Mr. Gupta credits his practice of Buddhism with giving him the wisdom necessary to overcome such deadlocks and with strengthening his sense of mission to help those suffering from natural disasters.

He says, "My motivation to become a Buddhist was derived from interest in the joyful activities and sincere efforts of Bharat Soka Gakkai (BSG) members for other people's happiness. Buddhist philosophy helped me realize the importance of my work because it attaches great value to each individual's life and clarifies life's wonder, dignity and infinite potential. In addition to making me more aware of the preciousness of life, Buddhism has helped me become more compassionate and sensitive. When I meet people who have suffered from disasters, I am able to empathize with them and encourage them. I no longer feel a sense of helplessness in my work because my Buddhist practice has given me immense courage and confidence in pursuing my goals."

Mr. Gupta was able to assist in the distribution of donations collected by BSG members to various locations in the Jamnagar district after this year's earthquake in northern India. He visited the affected areas and provided advance information to the Charitable Committee of BSG about the kind of relief materials required and the areas most in need of them.

In addition to his work with SEEDS, Mr. Gupta has been serving on BSG's Youth Peace Committee, which was established by SGI President Ikeda when he visited India in October 1997. During his visit, Mr. Ikeda met many leaders in society, aiming to help pave the way for peace in India. Striving to uphold its founder's spirit, the Youth Peace Committee has been striving to forge bonds of friendship in society through activities promoting peace, culture and education. Last year, members of the BSG youth division donated over 5,000 textbooks, story-books, notebooks and stationery items to underprivileged children in Delhi.

Mr. Gupta explains that in his dialogue with Arnold Toynbee, *Choose Life*, Mr. Ikeda states that "only a revolution in human ethics can bring about an end to disasters." He strongly feels that through his own human revolution, SEEDS will inevitably be able to influence others in bringing about an end to the kind of unethical, unsustainable development that gives rise to disasters. □