

SANITATION DRIVE TAKES A PROMISING TURN

Andrea L. Beckwith

Over a period of nearly 30 years, sanitation coverage in Bangladesh only increased from 3 per cent to 6 per cent. With the involvement of the Ansar and VDP, efforts to improve sanitation have only just started to gain momentum.

THE successes which have been achieved in Bangladesh in the area of immunisation and water supply have yet to be realised in the area of latrine sanitation. The use of sanitary latrines, as opposed to the traditional "hanging" latrines (over ponds or rivers), has been slow to take hold in this country. Widespread installation and usage of the former, however, is critical. More sanitary disposal of human excreta would significantly reduce the health risks associated with faecal contamination: Polio, typhoid, jaundice, dysentery and diarrhoeal diseases.

Efforts by the government's Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) and UNICEF, with the support of the Swiss Development Cooperation, DANIDA and other donors, to improve sanitation in Bangladesh have only just started to gain momentum. Recent progress can be attributed in large measure to the role which the Ansar and the Village Defense Party (VDP) are now assuming in the promotion of sanitary latrine coverage.

The Ansar and the VDP, in

collaboration with UNICEF, have made a commitment to work at the village level to ensure greater provision of sanitary latrines throughout the country. At UNICEF's behest, the DPHE and the Ansar/VDP leadership agreed to the involvement of the 4,500,000 Ansar/VDP members in the promotion, installation and monitoring of sanitary latrine facilities. The success of this collaborative effort and the po-

tential of this approach to alleviate the country's sanitation problems, can be seen in Ansar/VDP project villages.

During this writer's recent visit to Karol Shurichala in Mouchak Union of Kaliakoir Upazila, the 64 resident Ansar and VDP members (comprising an equal number of males and females) had gathered with other civilian members of the village to display their achievements in the promotion and installation of sanitary latrines. The visit was occasioned by the arrival in Bangladesh of UNICEF's Regional Director, Mr. Karl-Eric Knutsson. Mr. Knutsson, accompanied by UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh, Mr. Cole P. Dodge, was welcomed to the village by the Director General of the Ansar/VDP, Major General Mahbubur Rahman.

Addressing the gathering, Mr. Dodge candidly expressed his disappointment with the national effort prior to 1990 in sanitary latrine promotion. "The whole sanitation programme," he admitted, "has been a failure — a failure of the Government and a failure of UNICEF." Mr. Dodge recounted statistics highlighting Bangla-

desh's pressing sanitation problems, thereby setting the context within which the urgency of the Ansar/VDP's current efforts can best be understood.

Between 1962 and 1990, sanitation coverage in Bangladesh only increased from 3 per cent to 6 per cent. (Contrast this with increases in coverage under the immunisation programme of just over 65 per cent between 1986 and

1990.) Everyday, an estimated 28,000 metric tons of faecal matter are deposited in the public domain of this country, contaminating water sources and food. Of the roughly 900 thousand Bangladeshi children who die each year, 300 thousand lose their life to diarrhoeal disease.

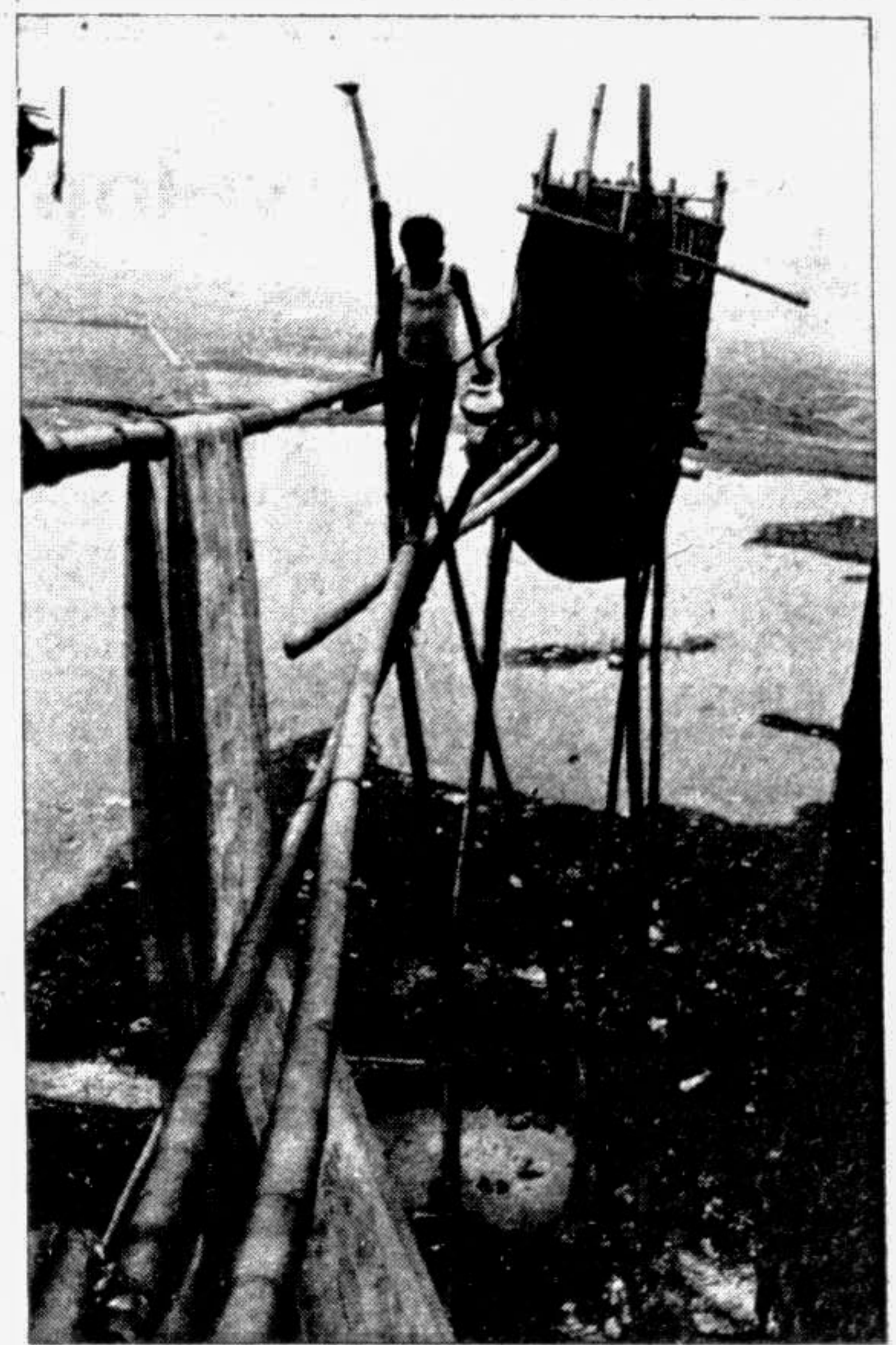
Referring to the Ansar and the VDP as the "vanguard", Mr. Dodge called upon them to ensure the installation of hy-

gienic latrines in each village. "Sanitation is the most important programme that you have ever been involved in," said Mr. Dodge. "It holds the most promise for your children." The immediate objective is for Ansar/VDP personnel, as respected members of society, to set an example for fellow villagers by constructing latrines in their homes and then promoting sanitary latrine installation and usage in the houses of the other villagers. For those who cannot afford latrines of concrete slabs and rings (considered by villagers to be more prestigious), simple pit latrines are being promoted. Ultimately, the goal is to have one sanitary latrine per family.

As Mr. Knutsson suggested, the Ansar and VDP shall be instrumental in motivating, mobilising, and training others. In Major General Rahman's own words: "We (Ansar/VDP) are a socio-economic development force." In a speech following the lunch hosted by the Ansar Academy, the Major General reassured Mr. Knutsson "that with [UNICEF's] support we will make this programme a success. If [you] can supply 4.5 million latrines tomorrow, they will all be absorbed by Ansar/VDP members and stored in the houses."

Presently, the demand for squat plates and rings used in the construction of latrines far exceeds the DPHE's supply of these materials. While the DPHE may currently be operating at full capacity, the private sector has moved in to meet the growing demand for sanitary latrines. To maintain profitability, however, private entrepreneurs are pressing for a subsidy arrangement similar to that which the DPHE enjoys.

The private sector, as Major General Rahman agreed, should be encouraged in its attempt to fill the existing gap. The scope for private sector involvement in promoting sanitation improvements is signif-



A hanging latrine.

— Photo: Shehzad Noorani.



Contaminated water being used for all purposes. — Photo: UNICEF.



Creating awareness about sanitary latrines. — Photo: UNICEF.

icant and is currently being studied by the Swiss Development Cooperation. Hopefully, this will be an area which NGOs and international donors will not overlook.

The task of creating a healthier Bangladesh through improved sanitation will not be easy, not least because the efforts by both the public and private sectors to improve sanitation through the installa-

tion of latrines will be made within the context of a growing population. The steps taken in the village of Karol Shurichala were truly encouraging, and the current strategy to involve the Ansar and VDP in the promotion of sanitation looks very promising.

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MINING THREATENS HUGE FLAMINGO HAVEN

TUCKED in the heart of Southern Africa, Botswana is known as an island of peace and tranquility in a continent too often torn by civil strife and factional wars. It is also a haven for wildlife and bird species that are elsewhere extinct.

Relatively undisturbed national parks and game reserves teem with flora and fauna. Botswana has the largest population of savannah elephants, threatened to extinction by ruthless poaching across Africa.

Of the 650,000 left in Africa, Botswana has 67,000. In north central Botswana, the Makgadikgadi salt pans are one of the largest flamingo populations in Africa.

Yet all this could perish if the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) government does not balance economic development with ecological conservation. It intends to turn the Makgadikgadi into a mining settlement.

The Makgadikgadi covers 6,500 square kilometres in north central Botswana. Apart from flamingos, it is home to vast herds of game.

Beneath this dried out lake are enormous quantities of soda ash—enough to serve Africa's needs for the foreseeable future and a sizeable chunk of the overseas market. Soda ash is used to make glass, steel, vanadium, paper pulp, detergent and other chemicals.

The government and the Anglo-American Corporation have formed a company called Soda Ash Botswana to exploit this natural brine. Mining preparations are well advanced at a depression called Sua Pan. An extensive network of amenities, including roads and railways, already cover a good part of the pan.

Total costs are expected to be around half a billion dollars, capital costs just over \$350 million. The initial output is projected at 300,000 tons of soda ash 650,000 of common salt annually.

Conservationists are alarmed at the environmental impact of this venture on the flamingos and other wildlife.

Soda Ash Botswana's environmental officer, Kukame Ngwanamotsoko, has assured that "we will conserve the ecological habitat of our land and participate in the conservation of selected natural areas in our neighbourhood and we'll preserve prehistoric and historic artifacts."

Environmental activists are troubled that over two-thirds of Sua Pan lies to the south of the mining site. Highways and railroads will cross a large portion of the pans from Francistown, 140 km to the south-east of the mine, and other cities.

Ngwanamotsoko says "the impact of our mining operations will comply with legal requirements," and adds that once the mine is operational

people will be discouraged from just wandering and driving in the pans.

Production is now beginning. Ecologists and conservationists argue that once large numbers of people arrive in Sua Pan it will not be easy to control their movement. They also say no proper environmental studies have been carried out and point out that sulphuric acid is produced when brine is converted into soda ash.

Soda Ash Botswana has indicated that it will be dumped back to the pan itself. This in itself must be disastrous because these toxic sub-

stances could seep through the water table in the Makgadikgadi and contaminate neighbouring areas.

Questions are also raised about a coal-powered plant being built at Sua, which will use coal from the Morupule Colliery in the Central District. Environmentalists say that poor legislation means the plant does not have to match standards of those in Europe or North America.

Another argument is over the dredging of the Boro River in the Okavango delta, north western Botswana. The government is doing this to provide people in Manu, Mopipi

and the Orapa township (to the south of delta) with water from the delta.

In January residents of the North West District forced the government to suspend the project. They told the Minister of Mineral Resource and Water Affairs, Archibald Mogwe, that the Southern Okavango Integrated Development Project, as it is called, will dry up the river and adversely affect the Okavango environment.

The local people say they were not properly consulted and that the government told them only of the benefits and hardly mentioned possible

damage to the environment. They also say the government has not made enough studies. People around the delta get their fish and twill (lots of reeds) from the river, as well as reeds for thatching their huts.

A three-person Greenpeace international fact-finding mission to the Okavango delta agreed studies had been inadequate. At a point where the dredging project was to start, a Greenpeace official told a government official: "Your data was collected over a four-year period. Yet the preferable period would be 20 years."

Environmental worries have brought the people of the

North West District together. In a rare show of unity all three political parties are unanimous in their objection to dredging the river.

Greenpeace officials appealed to the government to establish the Okavango delta system as a protected World Heritage Site and sought an assurance that plans to dredge the Boro River would be abandoned.

As a vast wetland of unique characteristics, the Okavango delta is home to a wide variety of wild species, including the cheetah and the endangered wattled crane.

Says Allan Thornton, of Greenpeace International: "We have been overwhelmed by the sentiments expressed by local inhabitants for the survival of the Okavango."

However, the government does not rule out dredging. Says Mogwe: "Government does have to keep the dredging issue open, if in the end it is the only option through which government can meet its obligation to provide water to Maun and communities down the river."

Parts of the Boro River are said to have dried up as a result of dredging by Anglo-American Corporation back in the Fifties. Greenpeace officials met Anglo-American Corporation officials to seek an explanation of the impact of their dredging.

Plans to dam the Okavango river and new mining activities in the Makgadikgadi all contradict government pledges to attract more tourists from abroad.

Up to 80,000 tourists visit Botswana each year earning \$30-45 million in foreign exchange. —GEMINI NEWS

Bulgaria's Poisoned Environment Cries for Attention

Since the fall of communism in Bulgaria 1989, economic problems have preoccupied the government. Environmental issues, which are now critical, have not received the attention they need. Solutions to arsenic poisoning, water pollution and shortages are still out of reach. But as Gemini News Reports, there is optimism that democracy and a stronger tourism industry will bring change. by Annie Kay

In the town of Srednogie, Bulgaria, the copper refinery has polluted the air to between six and 60 times the permitted arsenic content. In the soil it is between two and ten times the permitted level, and in a sample of local people, arsenic concentrations in their hair and nails reached between ten and 40 times higher than average.

Many hoped the end of communism in Bulgaria in 1989 would be the beginning of solutions for the country's grave environmental problems.

But since then, Bulgarian ship of state has grown increasingly unsteady as its passengers rush from one crisis to another. While awareness of ecological problems has increased, the economic crisis prevents the implementation of effective measures.

Even in 1989, before glasnost had any effect on the lives of Bulgarians, there was plenty of information available on the problems created by industrial pollution. During the 1980s, the build-up of pollution in the air, soil, rivers and the Black Sea reached a highly dangerous state.

As much as 37,000 hectares of arable land nationwide are polluted by heavy metals above admissible levels.

There are even greater problems with water. Bulgaria has access to no major rivers apart from the Danube, which is polluted before it gets to

Bulgaria. A series of dry summers and winters caused serious water shortages in the summer of 1990. Industries were consuming much of the water supply and only recently have water re-cycling and less wasteful technology been encouraged.

kilometre from the Danube, was cut off from the Danube to protect it from pollution, but the link had to be re-opened because of dropping water levels, even though many people fear the effect of pollution on wildlife. It has the status as a biospheric reserve of the Man and Biosphere Pro-

gramme (MAB) of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which offers it some protection. However, all important areas for birds around Burgas, a major port on the Black Sea Coast, suffer from pollution from neighbouring industries, agricultural effluents, hunting,



Hydro-electric dams lower the level of the Danube noticeably, which in turn takes water away from marshlands and wetlands adjacent to the river. Since 1944, many of these areas have been drained or modified for agriculture and some for industrial development. Lake Srebarna, about one

At present Lake Atanassovo, the best protected site, and on the Ramsar list, is adjacent to Burgas airport, where future development is inevitable. Birds at present face numerous overhead wires which cross the lake and its approaches. The situation at nearby Lake Mandra is likely to worsen when a steel manufacturing plant, still under construction, becomes operational.

Although official protection has been extended to over 400 sites in the country, banning hunting and fishing does little good if an industrial complex is pumping waste into the river or lake concerned. Environmental groups still lack power and financing. In the new Bulgaria, it is expected that tourism and agriculture will be twin pillars of the economy. Hopefully, those developing tourism will realise before it is too late, that the protection of flora and fauna is as crucial as the construction of new hotels.

Wildlife Conservation in India

by Heera Nawaz

observed: "Whatever the economic or political context, what happens now to animals will eventually happen to man. The conservation of our inheritance deserves the same natural care as that of our economic development."

Moreover, the uses of wildlife are numerous. Animal-based products range from cod to halibut liver oils as rich sources of vitamins A and D. No less than 40 per cent of the drugs used in medical care are derived from "wild" sources and a quarter of all prescriptions are biological in origin. In fact, the biological component extends to the conservation of the biosphere through preservation of essential life processes that constitute the ecosystems of the world. However, more than any of these factors, the significance of wildlife lies in its great

visual splendour and the deep understanding it provides to the meaning of life. As Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked: "Life would become very dull and colourless if we did not have these magnificent animals and birds to look at and play with."

It may be noted that in ancient times, wildlife conservation occupied a very high priority with Indians. Emperor Ashoka is said to have set up several abhayaranyas (sanctuaries) for the protection of animals. "Wild Game Laws" and "Fishing Laws" were also formulated and inscribed in his stone edicts. Besides, over the years, animals like cows, monkeys, cobras and peacocks have come to assume religious significance. In villages, children are brought up on stories from the

Panchatantra and Hitopdesa that glorify the caprices of wild animals. Furthermore, Kautilya's Arthashastra prescribes the most severe punishment to anybody caught trapping or molesting deer, bison and other animals. They were best left to roam about fearlessly and leisurely in the wilderness, much to the delight of onlookers.

In modern times, things took an different turn following ruthless poaching, trapping and massacre of animals in the name of shikar. During the last three decades itself, India lost about a dozen rare animals and an equal number of bird species due to such indiscriminate killings. The single-horned rhinoceros, the cheetah, the brown antler deer, pink-headed duck and mountain quail are almost extinct as a result.

In 1952, the Indian Wildlife Board was set up which led to several States establishing sanctuaries and enacting laws for the protection of wildlife. A study conducted by the Board that year revealed that there were barely 1827 tigers left in the country — a sharp drop from a figure of 40,000 estimated at the turn of the century. With the intervention of wildlife activists and public opinion makers, hunting of tigers was banned in India in 1970. Some "sportsmen" actually went to court appealing against this ban, but the ruling went in favour of the tiger.

Three years later, spear-headed by the World Wildlife Fund, the Project Tiger campaign was launched. Within a span of seven years, the tiger population rose from 1,827 to 3,015 as a result. Apart from the tiger, a number of other

endangered animals like the swamp deer, Indian elephant, wild buffalo, hispid hare and paygny hog benefitted.

Another success story (which is an offshoot of Project Tiger) involved the barasingha whose population had dwindled to 66 in the early 1970s.

Mr. H.S. Panwar, the well-known director of the project went out of his way to construct special "breeding enclosures" in forest reserves to raise the population of this rare species of deer.

Many exotic species like that of the elephant and monkey can attribute their survival to the religious thinking of Indians based on scriptures that defy these animals. Then there are the Jains who believed that no life should be deliberately killed. It is this consideration for the welfare of the ecological community as a whole that accounts for renewed interest in wildlife conservation among the Indian public. —(PTI Feature)

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Many believe that the dawning of democracy along with increased awareness of environmental problems among the public mean that a turning point has been reached.

The marshlands were for centuries important breeding grounds for species of birds including dalmatian pelicans, herons, grebes, terns, and swans with kingfishers, bee-eaters, woodpeckers and owls in the adjacent woodlands.