

Feature Development

A DAY TO REMEMBER Bangladeshis Contribute to International Volunteer Programme

by P.T. Kuriakose

TOMORROW, December 5, is the day set aside by the United Nations as International Volunteer Day (IVD), a day when the world salutes all people of goodwill who, without any compulsion from outside and with no expectation of material rewards, contribute their time, knowledge, skills, etc. to help other fellow human beings in need.

The decision to establish a special day for annual commemoration was taken by the UN General Assembly in December 1985. Making this celebration an annual event, instead of declaring one particular year for special celebration as has been the customary practice, underlines the importance the world body has attributed to the concept and practice of Volunteerism.

patients in hospitals, look after the deaf and the mute, build or repair village roads, teach the illiterate to read and write, etc. In a world that seems to be mesmerized by the glamour of wealth and power, these individuals remind us of the intrinsic goodness of man. It is to these people that the International Volunteer Day belongs.

While we honour our Volunteers, we cannot also forget the unpleasant reality that today volunteerism is losing ground. Therefore, on an occasion like International Volunteer Day, it will be appropriate to examine how best one can recapture the spirit of Volunteerism. Asian societies had in the past given a lot of importance to voluntary work. The expression 'voluntary organizations', so often used in South Asia, has a lot to do with this history. Village people used to help each other in times of joy and sorrow or even during work in the field. Unfortunately, the growing tendency to rely upon governments to satisfy all individual and community needs has begun to erode this spirit of service. Today, people tend to look to governments to find solutions to their problems. Obviously, it is not possible for governments to satisfy everybody. They have neither the inclination nor the capacity to be the good Samaritans. That is why it is time for Asians to go back to their roots and re-discover how many opportunities for self-fulfilment still exist and how in the process everyday living can be enriched.

Bangladeshis citizens who are joined in the UN Volunteer programme to assist people in the Third World. Being a poor developing country, Bangladesh does not have its own international volunteer sending programme like, for example, the United States, Japan and Australia. However, Bangladesh



Rekha Lutfun Nahar from Bangladesh now working in the slums of Manila, Philippines.



Nazrul Islam, a Bangladeshi volunteer planting a tree in Bharatpur, India.

has been an active participant in the UN Volunteer Programme, having provided hundreds of Volunteers to the UN system both as UNV Specialists and UNV Domestic Development Services (DDS) Field Workers. While UNV Specialists are individuals with specialized technical skills like

engineers and doctors, the DDS Field Workers are community workers who assist local communities to promote grassroots development. These Field Workers in particular have brought glory and recognition to their motherland. Although DDS Field Workers are UN officials in their own right, they do constitute a very special category of UN officials. They live and work with poor people in some of the poorest countries of the world, even sharing a room with a family and otherwise leading a simple life just like the people they have come to serve. They have succeeded in overcoming barriers of language, religion and a host of other prejudices. They have served with great success in such countries as Nepal, India, Philippines, Indonesia, Maldives and Zambia.

It is this intimate association with the wretched of the earth in the countries of their assignment that has made so many Bangladeshi Field Workers so popular. The people of Gempolsari in Indonesia still remember with gratitude the good work done by ex-DDS Field Worker, Amranul H. Kamal, a young Bangladeshi from Khadim Nagar, Sylhet. Similarly, there is a young Bangladeshi woman, Rekha Lutfun Nahar working in the slums of Manila, whose work with women and children has become a source of inspiration for so many. Yet at another place near Anandhpura in Sri Lanka, there is a road called Abdul Manan Mawatha. Abdul Manan was not a diplomat nor the President or Prime Minister of his country but a simple DDS Field

Worker from Bangladesh, whose dedication and hard-work touched the hearts of so many that they wanted to retain his memory by naming a newly constructed road after him.

Interestingly, Bangladesh also has given opportunities to young men and women from other countries to come to Bangladesh to share their knowledge and experience and learn from their host country. Although their numbers are not very large, they have come from countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal and Sri Lanka. So, it has not been only a one-way traffic. One has only to travel a few kilometers from Dhaka to see the tremendous accomplishments of a young Filipino, Francisco Noble, whose untiring efforts to help the rural people to improve their fish culture programme are well known. It is also a matter of satisfaction that the Government through the Department of Youth Development, has played a very constructive role in facilitating this mutual sharing. And so, on this day as the international community remembers volunteers from all over the world, let us also remember all of our local heroes, those who went to other countries, those who have come to Bangladesh and the many more thousands in the country who, silently but bravely, have dedicated themselves to help others in need. At the same time, let us fervently hope that the celebration of IV Day will encourage many more people, especially the youth of Bangladesh, to practise Volunteerism in whatever manner they are capable of.

The writer is a senior ranking official of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), based in Kuala Lumpur. He is responsible for the operation of the UN Volunteer programme in this region. The views expressed in this article, written exclusively for The Daily Star, do not necessarily represent those of the UNDP.

VSO Celebrates International Volunteer Day Tomorrow

VSO, Voluntary Service Overseas, will celebrate International Volunteer Day on Thursday 5th December.

VSO is a British NGO which has worked in E.Pakistan and Bangladesh since 1963. VSO's contribution to Bangladesh is the provision of skilled and motivated voluntary development workers, who work alongside local staff in Bangladeshi organisations. They offer their services for two years and will teach new skills and methods to their local colleagues.

After two years the VSO worker will leave, and the local organisation will continue to benefit from the training and ideas received.

At present there are 19 VSO development workers in Bangladesh working in health care, education, handicrafts and women's income generating projects, water projects and computer programming. Others work to improve management and administration skills. Future plans will see a

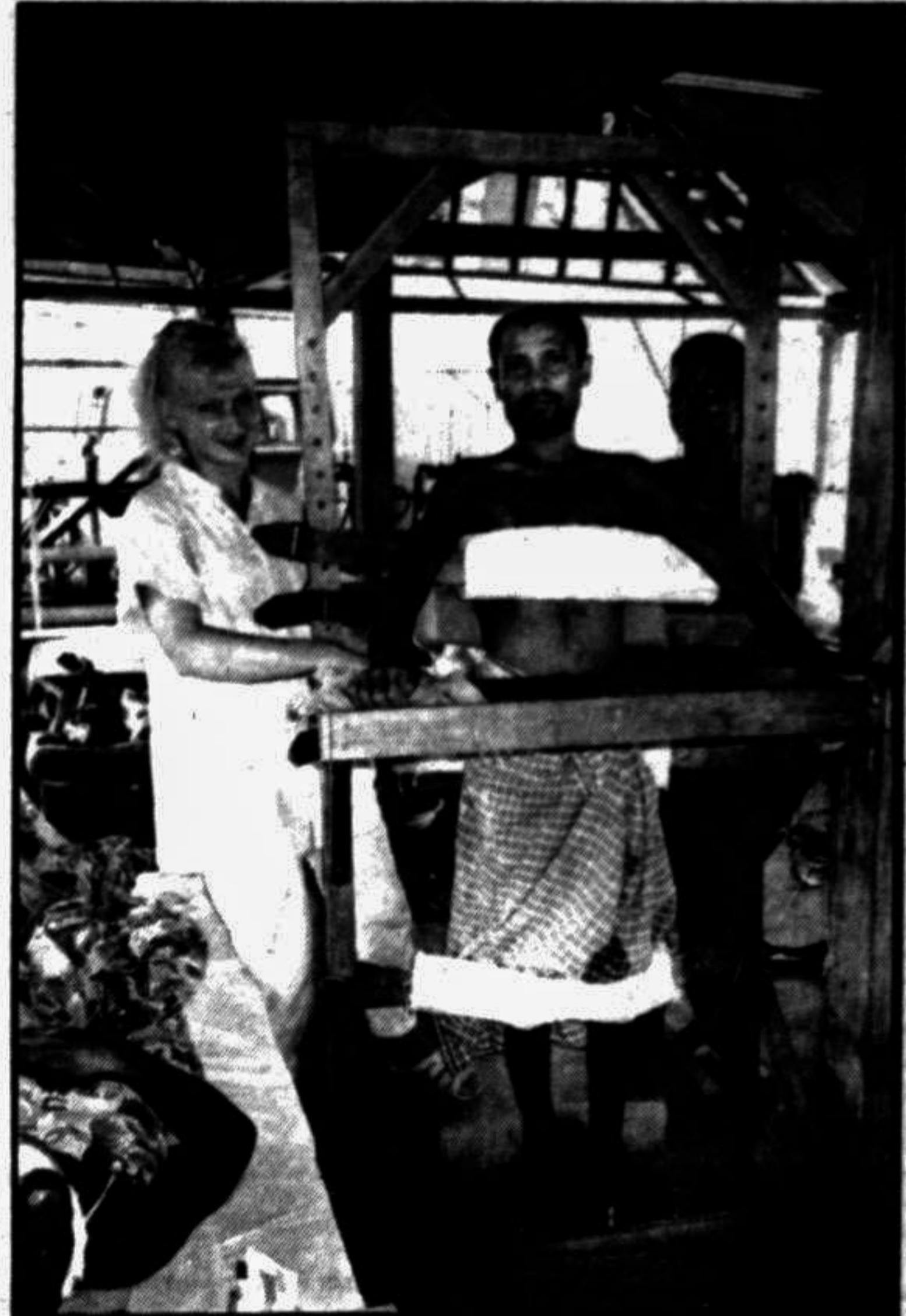
growth in health care, agriculture and the fisheries sectors. Jeremy Iles, VSO Director in Bangladesh said:

"There are many opportunities for highly trained and motivated VSO development workers to make a worthwhile input into Bangladesh's development. We work with people at a grassroots level, learn to speak Bangla and therefore develop good working relationships with local people. Through the creation of trust we can learn from each other, many people taking back new ideas and skills to Europe when they leave.

"We aim to create a mutually beneficial relationship through working with local organisations."

International Volunteer Day will be celebrated on December 5th by VSO, Concern, IFS, UNDP and other groups.

VSO is always interested to hear from NGOs, or other bodies who may have a need for a VSO development worker.



VSO physiotherapist working to help the paralysed regain mobility. Photo: VSO/Hanson-Kahn

The Prizes Nobel Did Not Give

WHEN he was 14, Jacob von Uexkull commuted between Sweden and Germany to buy and sell stamps at a profit. It did not take him long to amass a considerable personal fortune.

Not unlike Alfred Nobel — who made his fortune in dynamite then dedicated most of it to him famous prize — by 1980, Jacob had decided that his wealth could be of less benefit to himself than to mankind in general. He established the Right Livelihood Foundation and endowed it with money from which annual prizes could be awarded to worthy humanitarian projects.

Since 1980 more than 40 groups and individuals from around the world have won the awards. They include the Lokayan organisation, for its work on civil and women's rights in India, Petra Kelly of the German 'Green' movement, and the London-based Survival International Movement which works worldwide to secure the rights of the tribal people.

Although it is presented in Stockholm on the day before the Nobel Prize ceremony, the Right Livelihood Award is not a competitor with the Nobel. Rather, the trust which administers it sees the award's role as complementary.

Right Livelihood Awards aim to generate financial support and recognition for projects which enhance the most important human needs. These include the provision of adequate food, clothing and shelter, a clean environment, spir-

The alternative Nobel prize, formally known as the Right Livelihood Award, was founded in 1980 to give recognition to people and organisations which press for solutions to the world's most pressing problems. Among this year's winners, Gemini News Service reports, are a group of veteran anti-nuclear activists from the South Pacific, two Indian environmentalists and two courageous Brazilian peasant groups whose members have been killed and tortured while fighting for more equitable land distribution. by Norman Preston

itual development, and the survival of the earth itself.

For this year's award three efforts have been recognised: the fight against an environmentally damaging dam project in India, the battle for land reform in Brazil and the struggle against nuclear testing in the South Pacific. The winners share a one million Swedish Kroner prize, approximately \$165,000.

The 'Save Narmada Movement' and its leaders, Medha Parkar and Baba Apte have been recognised for their

long fight against the development of hundreds of dams along the Narmada river valley. The project would displace more than 300,000 people, mostly poor peasants.

According to the awarding foundation: "There is not the remotest prospect that the displaced people, the 'oustees', will be adequately resettled, nor that the ecological damage can be compensated for."

Ecologists say the project will cause immense environmental damage to forests and the habitat of rare wildlife. The World Bank is a major supporter of this project, but in 1990 Japanese aid funds were withdrawn because of the raging controversy.

Two Brazilian peasant farmer's movements also share this year's award. These are the Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). For many years both organisations have led the struggle for land reform in a country which has the one of the world's most unequal distributions of land.

According to Right Livelihood, two per cent of Brazilian landowners hold 60 per cent of the country's arable land. The Foundation cites a total of 1,566 farmers, social workers and Indians killed in land conflicts since 1964. During that time all but a handful of landowners have gone free in subsequent trials.

Despite slender financial resources, and undeterred by losing many a supporter to torture and death, CPT and MST continue to push for their goal of more equitable land ownership throughout Brazil. They also support the cause of environmental protection for Amazonia.

Bengt and Majre-Terese Danielsson are among the third group of awardees. As a young anthropologist Danielsson joined Thor Heyerdahl's Kon Tiki expedition in 1947 and stayed on to live in Polynesia with his French wife Marie Therese. The couple have been active in the cause of Polynesian rights and environmental organisations.

The Danielssons have been particularly concerned with the health and environmental effects of the French nuclear weapons testing programmes in the Pacific Ocean. They have led political resistance and published numerous articles in their fight against what they call nuclear colonialism.

In a similar vein the prize has been awarded to Jeton Anjan and the Rongelap people of the Marshall Islands. They have fought for the cleanup of their islands following radioactive pollution from US nuclear bomb tests in the Fifties.

In March 1991 Anjan won an immense personal victory when the US government agreed to an independent health and radiation survey for Rongelap Island. Anjan had campaigned for years for an impartial survey.

BEIJING: On a huge site cluttered with bricks, tiles and concrete blocks, thousands of construction workers moved to and fro amid dust and the roar of machines. It was typically a world of men, except for the presence of one woman.

Lu Jianbei, 30, was deputy-executive engineer in No 3 work area of Beijing No 2 Construction Company. An architecture graduate of Qinghua University, she had been assigned to direct 3,000 workers in completing the spectacular Intercontinental Hotel in Beijing within less than four months.

She was successful. The new hotel has accommodated guests from more than 40 countries, including journalists who covered the 11th Asian Games.

Ms Lu's work to complete construction of the 17-story building began in September, 1989. Although the deadline was December the same year, only 40 per cent of the rough-cast work was done. Several men approached by company officials, to complete the job had all declined, saying "the nut was too hard to eat."

The managers turned to Ms Lu. "We were rather reluctant to put such a burden on the shoulders of a woman," said Zhao Ke, a leading official of No 3 work area. "But we were left no other choice. Xiao Lu had convinced us that she had the courage and ability to accept the challenge."

Since she joined No 3 work area in 1983, Ms Lu had been responsible for constructing six buildings, all of which won awards as "excellent engineering projects."

"She is an engineer with both sound theoretical knowledge and practical experience," Mr Zhao said.

Lu Jianbei admitted the hotel assignment was "a tough job," but she would take the challenge because "it warmed me up."

Slim and bespectacled, Ms Lu was "just a girl" in the eyes of some workers. The 3,000 workers from 21 contract teams and five Hong Kong companies were strong and skilled men. Her first task was to convince them she was qualified to lead them.

"It seems you have to work doubly hard and there is no room for any mistakes," Ms Lu said.

Shortly after she took the job, she spotted a fault in a partition wall. She ordered the work redone, but the worker in charge refused, saying he couldn't see any problem.

"An error of four millimetres," Ms Lu said.

"Ah, no wonder you wear a pair of glasses — just to find bones in an egg!" he said. Taking out her own tools, Ms Lu showed the worker how to locate the angle of the partition wall. Without a word, he and his men did the work all over again. Ms Lu believes in being strict. But she realises she also

Architect Rises to a Challenge

It was a really tough construction assignment, but a young Chinese professional showed she had the capacity to push the project through on time

by Chen Ya

has to be sure of what she knows. "For example, if you told one of these experienced workers he was doing something wrong, you should tell him the reason and suggest a trick worth two of his."

Her competence, and a caring attitude, have won Ms Lu the trust and respect of the workers. "Xiao Lu is really smart, you have to recognise it," said an old worker. And she became an inspiration. "If Miss Lu can do such a tough job, why can't we?" said a young one.

To meet a deadline at one stage of construction, she led 12 workers in shifts, around the clock for three days. On the last day the workers were exhausted.

"But we finished the work," Ms Lu said.

She said the Intercontinental Hotel — described by Sheik Fahad, the late Chairman of Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), as "the most beautiful building I have ever seen" — seems to have become part of her. "Every part of the hotel reminds me of the hardship I endured in its construction," she said.

Many a time she was awakened at midnight to cope with an emergency — a machine that refused to work, leaks in air underground pipe, and so on. Sometimes she stood in waist-deep water for hours to sort out a snarl-up.

With the hotel completed on schedule, Ms Lu's fame as an engineer has spread.

"I should thank my father who made me turn to architecture," she said with a smile. Her dream was to be a doctor. Ms Lu's father, one of the first generation of construction workers of New China, was injured at the age of 32. He has been bedridden for more than

20 years. He hoped one of his children could continue his work. This hope was pinned on his second child, then called Lu Lisha and a high school student. "She is courageous and can bear hardships," the father said. To show his determination, he changed his daughter's given name to Jianbei, meaning "building Beijing."

Through talks with the father, Lu Jianbei understood his dream and gave up her own dream of being a doctor.

There have been other sacrifices. For example, while constructing the Intercontinental Hotel, she was to have a date with a young man who was interested in her. But they had barely talked for five minutes when Lu had to leave for some troubleshooting. The next day, the man came for her again, only to find her still occupied. He did not return.

"Nowadays, many young men have prejudices against career-women," Ms Lu sighed. "They think a career-woman prefers work to family. But the woman can make a sacrifice, even at the cost of her career, if the man loves her and is stronger than she is professionally. But if the woman is stronger, the man of course should do some more housework."

But Lu Jianbei is not so worried about marriage. "If I cannot meet someone who can understand me, I'd rather remain single. Of course, I feel sorry (about the young man). But to me, building the Intercontinental Hotel was more important than my personal life. If the hotel couldn't be completed just because I failed my duty, I would have regretted it all my life." — Depthnews

'The alternative Nobel prize'



Jacob von Uexkull (founder and chairman)

'for vision and work contributing to make life more whole, healing our planet and uplifting humanity'

Men Hesitant on Women's Role in Forestry

KATHMANDU: When Sharada Kharel joined the Nepal-Australia community forestry project as a professional worker, she got a terrific ribbing from friends and male colleagues.

But she persisted. She asked: Why should a project that aims to promote community participation be training men only when much of the work is in fact done by the women?

"Women, who make up half of Nepal's 19 million population, are the primary users of natural resources like forests and water," says Neeru Shrestha of the Tribhuvan University's Centre for Economic Development and Administration in Kirtipur.

However, not only are women excluded from the planning and policymaking phases of forestry management, forestry officials seem reluctant even to involve women at the community level.

Ms Kharel, for example, observes that when she asked their project manager to allow her to visit communities around the forests and mobilise the women for forest

protection, "he got nervous." On her insistence, the manager relented. Ms Kharel, a social activist when she was a university student, travelled to Kavre district east of Kathmandu valley where her parental family enjoyed some political influence and respect.

She has since discovered that women, while they contribute substantially to the family income, are deliberately kept outside the decision-making process.

The biggest problem was getting all the women living in scattered settlements near the forest to come together for consultation and discussion," Ms Kharel says.

Before anything else, she had to go to the men to ex-

plain in detail what she was doing in the village, and to seek their permission to get the women together.

To meet the woman of the house, she had to talk via the husband or a male member of the family, she being a stranger. At the first meeting of the women to form forest management groups, the husbands of the participants waited outside and listened to the discussions.

Nepal's forest users are scattered along several settlements covering a wide area. The mountainous and difficult terrain makes most villagers inaccessible to field workers.

The lack of contact with outsiders has created a certain wariness among villagers. To

win women's confidence, Ms Kharel introduced them to stoves using wood which are claimed to be 30 per cent more fuel-efficient and smoke-free.

She also explained that such "transfer of technology" is important to allow the women more time for creative work. Another advocate of women's wider participation in forest management is Ranju Hajur Panday, who completed a forestry course at the Institute of Forestry's central campus in Pokhara.

Poor schooling facilities, low academic competence of female students from the rural areas and a quota limiting female enrolment in forestry courses are the main reasons why few women are in forestry careers, she says.

Ten per cent of the total seats for technical certificate in forestry is reserved for female students. This is meant to encourage women to take up a forestry course, but it also sets a limit to the number of women who can be admitted.

In addition, 5 per cent of the seats are reserved for students from remote areas and five seats are for members of the Tharu community.