

Simplifying Life for India's Rising Middle Class

by Elaine and Nelson Stover

Although most Americans imagine India to be a land filled with poverty, its booming middle class rivals that of the United States in size and affluence. Along with the rising prosperity of the middle class have come the pressures and stresses so prevalent in this country.

When Shankar Jadhav, from ICA:India, attended the ICA conference in Prague in 1992, he participated in the *Lifestyle Simplification Lab* created by Elaine and Nelson Stover from Greensboro, NC. Seeing the relevance of the program for India, he invited the Stovers to conduct it in Pune.

Hosted by Thermax Company, a long-time supporter of the ICA's village development work and user of the ICA's participatory planning and leadership programs, the course took place in late January in Pune. In addition to the 13 Thermax employees, the Lab was attended by a couple referred by an Indian Lab participant in Greensboro, as well as five others affiliated with the ICA Pune office.

Participants had come for a variety of reasons — some were feeling the pressures of two-career families, some had teenagers whose TV-driven demands for name-brand merchandise were straining family budgets, and others sensed the futility of just earning a living.

The morning included the study of a paper written by Robert Gilman, of The Context Institute. Gilman's paper highlights three factors which determine society's environmental impact — population, affluence and technology. Participants saw the impact their society is having on the environment. With India's population surging up to the billion mark, just adding a single light bulb to every home means four more hydroelectric dams. In the think-tank which followed, participants shared the pressures of longer work hours and the shift to a monetized economy as more women enter the work force. In contrast to many

Western nations which have spent centuries heading toward industrialization, India has a host of recent advocates of simple living — Mahatma Gandhi, gurus and holy men who advocate the benefits of a spiritual life, and environmental activists. Some of these are impeding the progress of the huge Narmada hydro-electric dam and others are organizing women to plant trees.

The afternoon session began with a reading entitled "What is Enough?" by Alan Durning. Participants realized the futility of more, more, more. Shrikant Phadke, a retired government officer who spent two

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Group presenting their song promoting simple living.

years working with the Pune ICA staff, read a poem he had written pointing to the limitations of relying on money to provide personal fulfillment. In the ensuing workshop, participants explored the boundaries of enough for themselves. They expressed the need to slow down the drive to consumerism and to focus on the quality of their life in the context of building a sustainable society.

To conclude the day, four groups created motivational images toward a simpler life — a Hindi song, a billboard, a drama and TV spot announcements. After the seminar, Shankar and Shakuntala Jadhav participated in facilitator training so they could conduct the *Lifestyle Simplification Lab* with other groups throughout India. ☸

Elaine and Nelson Stover have worked with the ICA in Australia, Belgium, India and the United States. For more information on the Lifestyle Simplification Lab, call (910) 605-0143.

