Ganga Devi — the river goddess — the river Ganges, the life line of the northern Indian planes stretches all the way east to Calcutta. Ganga Devi is aged beyond her years with the struggle of family cares. The abortion and births of eight or nine children have dried her blood; their feeding, clothing and schooling have dried her bronchi. The failure of her husband's business, the desertion of her eldest son after getting a good job; the death of her husband and grown up daughter have broken her heart. She has 'settled'; i.e., married and employed all the children, even the youngest, who is mentally handicapped — the most functional I have ever seen — working as a "peon" (mail, file carrier and odd jobs) in the Shimla medical college, married to an orphan tribal girl. Yet Ganga Devi runs the household with an iron and knowledgeable hand. Not a hair turns without her consent. She knows all the rites and rituals for every feast of the moon, every sacrifice, every offering for the pacification of the dead and the deadied, and the dues to the hierarchy of elders. She prescribes the recipes for the daily fare, as well as the special fare for the feeding of the Brahmins to appease the dead, and the very, very special family recipes for preserves, pickles and rejuvenating, high protein tonics. She and her family are vegetarian, so high protein processing of wheat germ and cereals is carefully passed down from generation to generation. Yet Ganga Devi attends to and listens to people who come from far and near — massaging, healing, prescribing a diet, herbal medicine, advice and suggestions for local and family politicking; massaging a woman's stomach, directing

A case study is presented of an illiterate, but wise and knowledgeable Himalayan woman, who ably managed family and village affairs; farms, herbal healing; spinning and stitching. She could read the weather, the land, the trees, the crops, birds, animals and people. She is one of the millions of women who produce 50% of the world's food. She is also one of the 280 million illiterate women in India. But the present day agrarian-industrial development and the literate neo-Brahmins have not only bypassed, marginalized and devalued her, but have been living off the fat of her back and usurping the meagre resources of the third world. This development-literacy axis has deepened the gulf between peoples. This gulf is the root of all dehumanization and violence. What are the limits of the arrogance of the written word is the crucial question.

BY KISHWAR AHMED SHIRALI
her second son in setting a sprained ankle. Ganga Devi can hardly see, having sacrificed her sight to the stitching of clothes for family and village and spinning the finest wool into the small hours of night, to supplement and even at times support the meagre family income. And all this after the household chores of fetching fuel and water from distances and heights in

For the last two thousand years, the privileged, the elites, the parasites have been riding on the backs of the millions who toil to keep and maintain us, the top rural areas it is 46.42%: males, 51% females, 29%. In the urban areas, 67.44%: males, 73% and females 60.6%. In the Shimla rural areas, 37.16% literacy: males, 49.54% and females, 23.74%.

Ganga Devi lived and died in the village Ghana Hatti, 12 km west of the capital, Shimla. It is the rich and elite of the cities, the

The tragedy of Ganga Devi was that, when she became ill with the burden of supporting the life and health of others, she was treated by alien (allopathic) health systems which had reduced the able woman to a helpless dependent on expensive drugs. She never recovered and died after a long resistance.

Ganga Devi was one of the 280 million illiterate women of India. A statistic we look upon with horror, dismay, shame. Yet Ganga Devi could read the earth, the plants, the woods, the trees, the sun, the sky, the clouds, the rains, the sowing, the harvesting, the seasons, the people, the births and the deaths. She could predict droughts by looking at the length and intensity of the orange-red coloration of the cob-like ovary of the Himalan Snake plant; the intensity of the summer by the redness of the flowers of the silk-cotton tree.

I who have a Ph.D. in Psychology can read none of these. Yet me and the likes of me are squandering the meagre resources of the third and fourth world. We

dogs. And we in our arrogance have not even acknowledged this service, never asked what price we have extracted from the wretched of the earth. All over the earth, it is the illiterate poor, and it is the women who are the poorest of the poor and the most illiterate from the villages, that are the mainstay of a country's economy, through their cheap labour and their contribution in food production. In the northern states of India, by and large it is the women who are mostly involved in tending the land and the animals, whereas the men aspire to a more comfortable life in offices and cities. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has found that women in rural areas grow at least 50 per cent of the world's food.1

In India there are 343.3 million illiterate persons (approximately 49%). The southern state of Kerala has the highest literacy rate of 69% and the desert state of Rajasthan has a rate of 24% with the lowest female rate of literacy at 12%. In the Himalayan State of Himachal Pradesh, the literacy rate is 42.48%: males, 58% and females, 31.4%. In the Neo-Brahmins, who are the beneficiaries of the country's educational system, a system which can be well represented by the inverted pyramids theory. The top 1% enjoys 40% of the National Income and resources, whereas the lowest 55% gets only 4%. There are a number of schemes to alleviate poverty, but hardly a trickle filters down to those who really need it. 52% of the population is below the poverty line; i.e., they hardly get two square meals a day. Malnutrition, anaemia, V.D. and T.B. are rampant in the hills. Ivan Illich has been vindicated: the inroads of development have only bled the countryside. The so-called green and white revolutions (wheat, rice and milk) and the apple-revolution of the Himachal Pradesh have only gone to nourish the cities. These cash crops are not for the rural poor. Zafar Futehally finds, "Whatever development [there has been] has led to only menial jobs for the hill people with the bulk of profits going to outsiders from the plains." Cement-concrete houses and Japanese watches (male properties) have been traded for nourishment and health. Again it is the women and chil-

\[ \text{Inverted Pyramids Theory} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>National Income</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top</td>
<td>1% 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top</td>
<td>10% 34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>25% 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>55% 4%</td>
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[1] The inverted pyramids theory represents the distribution of resources and income, with the top 1% enjoying 40% of the National Income and resources, whereas the lowest 55% gets only 4%. There are a number of schemes to alleviate poverty, but hardly a trickle filters down to those who really need it. 52% of the population is below the poverty line; i.e., they hardly get two square meals a day. Malnutrition, anaemia, V.D. and T.B. are rampant in the hills. Ivan Illich has been vindicated: the inroads of development have only bled the countryside. The so-called green and white revolutions (wheat, rice and milk) and the apple-revolution of the Himachal Pradesh have only gone to nourish the cities. These cash crops are not for the rural poor. Zafar Futehally finds, "Whatever development [there has been] has led to only menial jobs for the hill people with the bulk of profits going to outsiders from the plains." Cement-concrete houses and Japanese watches (male properties) have been traded for nourishment and health. Again it is the women and chil-
children who are the victims of our present day 'development.' Mental illness has been found in Himachal Pradesh to be higher in females of agricultural occupation, lower casts, lower education and income.4

The current Punjab problem of Sikh terrorism and fundamentalism could be viewed in the light of 'development,' where the green revolution has made the rich richer and the poor poorer. The poor peasants happen to be Sikhs and the rich traders and business men happen to be urban Hindus. Traditionally a wheat growing area, Punjab (and neighbor Haryana) has taken to growing high-yielding, high-quality rice — mostly for export and profit taking. This breed of rice requires a great deal of irrigation. The water supply being limited and coming from the rivers of the Himalayan mountains, water dispute is a major bone of contention and the source of demand for Khalistan. Here again the main victims are women and children who suffer most brutally in the male games of violence and rioting. If development is counted in the industrialization of the country, most of the industries are capital rather than labour intense. They have helped largely in destroying indigenous cottage industries: plastic has replaced pottery; mechanization has deprived women of their traditional jobs of weaving and hoeing, harvesting, threshing, and marketing vegetables, fish, etc. They cannot operate tractors, threshers, harvester combines, air conditioned vending trucks — these have been usurped by the males. Whole communities of rural poor women and children have been forced out of their homes, into the city slums which are hot beds of crime, drugs and prostitution. If development means multi-million dollar huge dams, in India there is enough evidence to show that whole villages have been uprooted, forests, hundreds of years old, have been submerged, and the neighboring hills, the fragile Himalayas, made unstable, giving rise to landslides, floods and earthquakes. (For example, Tehri Garhwal Dam, The Narbada Project, The Bodhghat Project)

written word has brought us to the brink of annihilation. The very paper I write on, the very words that I am spawning, are felling a tree, a large price indeed for literacy. Ganga Devi remains a crucial question in our thrust for literacy and development.

1 Kamla Bhasin and Bina Agarwal, Women and Media: Analysis Alternatives and Acts (Delhi: Kali for Women with ISIS, International Pacific and Asian

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