



CHC's Role in CHAI's Promotion of Community Health

Some Reflections

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I came into the Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI) in August 1980, after heading a regional organization called Andhra Pradesh Social Service Society (APSSS), based in Hyderabad. I came on condition to promote rural health through Community Health programmes in what was primarily a 'professional organization, dominated by big hospitals'.

Fr. James S. Tong, SJ, the first Executive Director of CHAI (1957-74), had already sown the seed of community health. He became my mentor, friend, philosopher and guide, with regard to the concept of Community Health. In addition, I also met Sr. Ann Cummins of Medical Mission Sisters, another champion of community health. This group of sisters had created history by moving away from big institutions and going to the communities.

Themes of our annual conventions soon included more and more of community health-related topics. During the exhibition held along with conventions, community health and alternative systems of health care found increasing space. Another step taken was the active collaboration and networking with VHAI, CMAI, AIDAN, MFC, ACHAN and other organizations with similar thinking.

After taking over as the Executive Director of CHAI in 1980, one of the first things I did was to go to St. John's and meet the then Dean, Dr. C.M. Francis. I told him about my mandate to promote community health in and through CHAI. Dr. Francis assured me of all help and introduced me to Drs Ravi Narayan and Thelma Narayan of Community Health Department of St. John's. I had already met Dr. Thelma when she came as a volunteer to the Andhra Cyclone Relief camp in Nagayalanka in 1977. A relationship, both personal and organizational, started that day with Dr Francis and the Narayans which continued throughout my sixteen years of leading CHAI; the relationship continues even today in all that I have been doing at the community level.

When Community Health Cell (CHC) was born in 1984 I was there. If I were a writer, I could have written at least a volume, if not more, narrating all that happened in and through CHAI during 1984-1996, with the support

of the CHC team which included Drs Ravi and Thelma Narayan as co-initiators, and later Dr C.M. Francis, as consultant and advisor, and Dr. Shirdi Prasad as a trainer in alternative systems of medicine. If I could achieve anything in and through CHAI regarding community health, it was only because of this close link with CHC and these key resource-persons.

Reorientation of the CHAI team and its members to the new challenge of community health; the evolution of various training programmes in community health for members at various levels; the conversion of the in-house journal of 'Medical Service' to a more outward-looking journal for the voluntary sector *Health Action*; CHAI golden jubilee studies including the Delphi prediction on health situation in India and the role of the voluntary and mission sector; the development of interest in rational drug policy, and integration of traditional systems of medicine; and proactive networking efforts towards a health movement with other national networks by CHAI in those days — all these were possible through the catalytic support of CHC and its team of inspirational resource persons. This enthusiastic linkage continued long beyond my phase of directorship of CHAI. The Community Health Cell became a major technical and resource partner for CHAI in later years. Finally, it is because of the CHC's vision and persuasion that the CHAI network is now involved with people's health movement at different levels.

After leaving CHAI, I started *Sanghamitra*, the movement for social transformation working in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh. Community Health Cell continues to be a partner with our organization. We were also invited to be a mentor of CHC's Community Health Fellowship Scheme and Learning Programmes. As a honorary member of SOCHARA, I continue to be associated with CHC in all it does; as it celebrates its silver jubilee celebration, I am glad to share this short reflection and record my appreciation for this little cell and its continuing inspiration and motivation of so many people more towards community health action relevant to the Health for All movement. ■

(*Sanghamitra, Andhra Pradesh*)