

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Joseph Battat
Mary Lynne Bird
Steven Butler
Sharon F. Doorasamy
William F. Foote
Peter Geithner
Gary Hartshorn
Kitty Hempstone
Katherine Roth Kono
Cheng Li
Peter Bird Martin
Chandler Rosenberger
Edmund Sutton

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

RDC-5
SOUTH ASIA

Richard Connerney is a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying the influence and impact of religion on Indian life and society.

Outreach and Outrage: AIDS and the Rights of Sexual Minorities in Uttar Pradesh

By Richard D. Connerney

MAY 2005

LUCKNOW, India—On a hot night in late April, Kasim Mehedi, an AIDS outreach worker for the Bharosa Trust, and I walked through a rusty iron gate into the darkness of Hazrat Begum Park. During the day, Lucknow's Hazrat Begum Park is a popular tourist destination where visitors can view two 19th century mausoleums built in honor of Nawab Sa'adat Ali Khan (d.1814) and his wife, Hazrat Begum. At night, however, the park becomes a shadowy no-man's-land where drug addicts, prostitutes, homosexuals and others rejected by polite Lucknow society congregate.

When my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I could see dark silhouettes moving across the lawn toward us. As these shapes moved closer, Kasim greeted each of them by name. With a warm smile and a persistent laugh, he passed out free condoms and educational pamphlets warning about the dangers of AIDS to everyone he met. Although I was initially wary of the unlit recesses of the Park, Kasim put my fears to rest. Hazrat Begum Park is usually peaceful, he told me—unless the police arrive.



Kasim (on the left), an outreach worker for the Bharosa Trust, talks to a young man in Hazrat Begum Park.



Hazrat Begum Park in downtown Lucknow, the site of the mausoleums of Nawab Sa'adat Ali Khan (d. 1814), and his wife



We approached a young woman who was standing near one of the mausoleums. Kasim introduced her as Nandini. As we spoke, I realized that she was not actually a woman but a *hijra*, or transsexual. Hijras are the modern-day version of Mughal court eunuchs. They live communally with other hijras, and usually earn their living from dancing, singing and prostitution.

Although I had read about them in books, I had never actually met a hijra face-



Nandini, a hijra, or transsexual, in Hazrat Begum Park

to-face. I knew that some undergo castration while others are simply cross-dressers, and I wanted know to which category Nandini belonged. Unable to think of a graceful way to pose my question in Hindi, I asked, “*Kya aap apna ling kat ho gya?*” [Have you cut your penis off?]

“Of course,” Nandini said with a wink.¹

A small group of men gathered around Kasim, Nandini and me. They wanted to know about America. “I hear that homosexuals can marry their *pyaari* [lover] in America. Is that true?”

“Not really,” I answered. “I don’t think that you can do that in most states,”

Nandini did not believe me. “You must introduce me to American men,” she insisted. “I want to move to your country and become a housewife.”

“If you moved to New York City, Nandini,” I said, “I bet you would fit right in.”

What to Tell the Children? : The Case of The Lucknow Four

Misinformation about AIDS is widespread in Uttar Pradesh. Many people, for example, insist that AIDS is spread by mosquitoes—a medical impossibility. It is this type of inaccuracy that organizations like the Bharosa Trust are designed to combat. Effective outreach and education campaigns can play a vital role in lowering the infection rates of AIDS. In Uttar Pradesh, unfortunately, the type of social work that I witnessed in Hazrat Begum Park can land outreach workers like Kasim in jail.

This is exactly what happened in the summer of 2001. In a notorious case of public morality gone haywire, the Lucknow police arrested an outreach worker from the Bharosa Trust as part of a vice sting in a public park. When the outreach worker identified himself as a member of

an NGO who was distributing condoms to practicing homosexuals, the police responded by raiding the offices of both the Bharosa Trust and an associated organization, the British-based Naz Foundation International (NFI).

Confiscating a safe-sex instructional video called “Safer Sex for Men” and a book about sexual identity entitled *What to Tell the Children* (published by the British Broadcasting Corporation), the police then arrested three more outreach workers, including the director of the Bharosa Trust, Mr. Arif Jafar. Authorities charged all four men with violating Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibits committing or abetting “acts against the order of nature,” and with distributing obscene material. These were only the official charges. In the press, the police claimed to have discovered a “gay brothel.” The outreach workers spent over six weeks in jail, brutalized by both their prison guards and the local media. The state government finally released them only under intense pressure from human-rights groups.

I met with Arif Jafar, still director of the Bharosa Trust, and Mr. Shivananda Khan, founder of the Naz Foundation International, to talk about their court case. Arif told me that the police beat him repeatedly during his time in jail. Although the prosecutor dropped the charge of abetting unnatural sexual acts, the charge of obscenity still stands three years later. Arif says he must appear in court once a month to await a mysterious government witness who never appears. His lawyer once obtained the name and address of this “witness,” who, upon investigation, did not reside at the address given and could not be located.

Shivananda Khan, the founder of Naz Foundation



Shivananda Khan OBE (left) and Arif Jafar (right), directors of Naz International and The Bharosa Trust, respectively. Arif spent over six weeks in jail in 2001 on charges of distributing obscene material and abetting an act “against the order of nature.” Three years later, he still makes regular court appearances, waiting for a government witness that never appears.

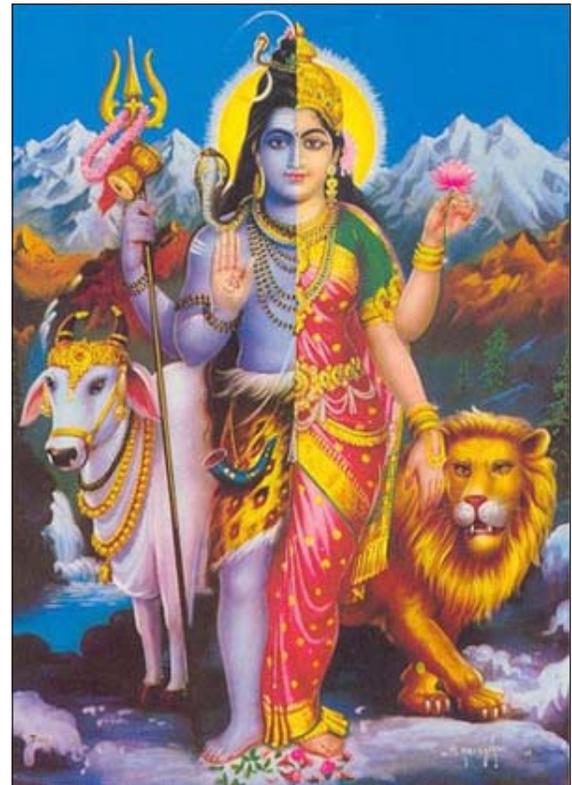
¹ Later Kasim told me that Nandini’s penis was, in truth, still firmly attached. He explained that Nandini makes more money as a prostitute if she claims to be castrated.

International (and a recent recipient of the Order of the British Empire, or OBE), began working as an activist for the gay and lesbian community in London in the early 1990s. During this work, he met Naz, a young Pakistani man who was deeply troubled by his own sexual orientation. The experience spawned the Naz Project, an outreach program designed specifically for South Asian homosexuals living in Britain. He later decided that a similar program should exist in Asia itself. Over the last ten years, Mr. Khan's original Naz Project has grown and diversified into a handful of semi-autonomous programs all over subcontinent, including Bangladesh.

Mr. Khan tells me that he faces some difficult challenges in his attempt to reach out to male homosexuals in Uttar Pradesh. For example, when he tries to talk to male prostitutes about the need to wear condoms, they often respond by saying, "I am dying of starvation right now, why should I worry about AIDS?" Men who engage in prostitution are often abjectly poor and require the money they receive from sex work to support their wives and children. For people in such desperate economic situations, day-to-day survival is more important than worrying about a disease that may remain asymptomatic for as long as a decade.

Section 377

Perhaps the biggest challenges to AIDS outreach in Uttar Pradesh, however, are legal and cultural rather than



Ardhanariishvara, the "Lord that is half-woman."
A form of the god Shiva.²

economic. In much of America, tolerance for homosexuals has increased over time. Even the conservative U.S. Supreme Court has handed down several decisions (e.g. Lawrence vs. Texas) that prevent the judiciary system from climbing into bed with consenting adults. While gay marriage continues to be a divisive issue, civil unions and inheritance rights for gay people have gained mainstream support in many states.

In India, the trend sometimes seems to be in the other direction. Ancient Indian attitudes about homosexuality could be quite *laissez-faire*. Although the *Artha Shastra*, an ancient Sanskrit text on civil society, mentions male homosexuality in a list of sexual crimes, the penalty was quite mild and required the offender to pay only a small monetary fine. While Sanskrit literature has nothing comparable to Plato's *Symposium* or Patronius' *Satyricon* to give evidence of widespread tolerance for homosexuality in the ancient world, Indian mythology does include a number of androgynous and hermaphroditic characters that can be taken to mean that gender roles were, at times, fluid.

Modern India, on the other hand, groans under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that makes any act "against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal" punishable by life imprisonment. The wording of the law is so vague that, depending on your definition of "order of nature," almost anyone could already be guilty. The Bharosa Trust, in association with NFI,

² Image from http://www.archaka.com/dynamic_includes/images/ardhanarishvara.jpg

is leading a legal challenge to Section 377.

They do not have an easy road ahead of them. The Delhi high court recently defended the statute, saying: “The purpose of Section 377 is to provide a healthy environment in society by criminalizing unnatural sexual activities...”³. The irony of the phrase “healthy environment” is that Section 377 effectively prevents state-funded outreach to gay and bisexual males, ensuring that misinformation—and the HIV virus—will continue to spread among those who are most at risk.

To make matters worse, those most affected by Section 377 often do not even realize that the law is on the books. Words we use in the West to describe sexual orientation (e.g. heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) have little currency in Uttar Pradesh. A great deal of high-risk sexual activity takes place in Lucknow among men who do not consider themselves gay or bisexual, but simply engaged in *musti*. *Musti* is difficult to translate into English, but could be rendered as “exuberant friendship.” It denotes anything from innocent, fraternal camaraderie to prolonged homosexual liaison.

Men who engage in the latter type of *musti* often do not consider it “sex,” a word they reserve for heterosexual intercourse. In fact, some Indian men may engage in a wide variety of homosexual activity without ever questioning their sexual identity or having any clear idea of what the term “sexual identity” means. When gay sex occurs with an effeminate male (called a *kothi* or *zenanna*), Indian men often do not consider the act homosexual because they do not identify their sexual partner as a man. In India “the love that dare not speak its name” often has no name to begin with. An NFI publication describes this confusing situation in the following way:

“There are men who have sex with other males because they do not consider these males to be men. There are males who do not think of themselves as men, who have sex with real men.”⁴

The taxonomy of sexuality in North India is so perplexing that, for the purposes of AIDS outreach, organizations like the Naz Foundation International and the Bharosa Trust have adopted the acronym MSM (Men having Sex with Men). MSM provides a useful nomenclature for AIDS outreach without raising the issue of sexual identity. Even this broad designation has serious drawbacks, however. If practicing homosexuals do not consider *musti*

sex, then even the term MSM can mean little to them.

Thus, when questions of the legality of homosexuality or sodomy arise, most Indian men turn a deaf ear. Uttar Pradesh has no gay neighborhoods or gay bookstores, and no concept of gay people as a distinct demographic group with unique political interests. Indian politicians do not court the gay vote like American politicians, and there is therefore little political initiative to change laws like Section 377.

Unfortunately, the very organizations that are currently fighting Section 377 spend much of their time fighting each other. NFI and the Bharosa Trust have a contentious relationship with India’s other major NGO in the field, the Bombay-based Hamsafar. The bad blood between these organizations, which should be united against a common enemy, recently led one High Court judge to express his exasperation at their mutual hostility.⁵

The Uttar Pradesh State AIDS Control Society

I first learned about the existence of the Uttar Pradesh State AIDS Control Society (UPSACS) from a billboard. The picture showed a young woman talking to a young, wide-eyed man. Between them the caption read, “Do you want love? How intelligent are you? Stay far away from AIDS” and listed an address to a website. When I searched for this website over a period of weeks, I was not able to gain access to it. I later learned that the billboard was the last survivor of a series of billboards put up by UPSACS in cooperation with UNICEF. The other billboards had been taken down when their slogans (e.g. “Hero or



A billboard designed by UNICEF and the Uttar Pradesh State AIDS Control Society. The caption reads “Do you want love? How intelligent are you? Stay far away from AIDS.” The website listed still did not exist at the time this newsletter was written.

³ *Times of India: Lucknow Edition* 4/02/05 “Supreme Court expresses surprise over hostility among NGOs on homosexuality” pg. 7

⁴ Shivananda Khan, Aditya Bondyopadhyay, Dr. Carol Jenkins; “Eyes Wide Shut: Violence, stigma and social exclusion MSM, HIV and social justice in South Asia” www.nfi.net/essays

⁵ *Times of India: Lucknow Edition* 4/02/05 “Supreme Court expresses surprise over hostility among NGOs on homosexuality” pg. 7

Zero?") were widely perceived as offensive to people who suffered from AIDS.

Curious about UPSACS, a local branch of the National Aids Control Organization (NACO), I went to visit their office in Lucknow. I expected to have a private conversation with Dr. Yogesh Chandra, the Joint Director of UPSACS. Instead, Dr. Chandra escorted me into a large boardroom and seated me in front of six of UPSACS' senior directors. During the conversation that followed, Dr. Chandra remained silent, except for an occasional nod of the head. Most of my questions were answered by the Information, Education and Communication Team, which consisted of two verbose young women, Ms. Mukta Sharma and Ms. Monica Chatravedi.

When asked about UPSACS' billboards—the ones with the non-existent website—the Information Education and Communication Team told me that the UPSACS website had "changed servers" and would soon be available at a different web address. On the subject of the slogans that seemed to equate being infected with HIV to having no value as a human being (i.e. "Hero or Zero?"), Ms. Chatravedi told me that the reaction to the billboard had been "over the top." Furthermore, she told me, UNICEF originally designed the billboards and UPSACS only approved them.

At this point, the other directors joined the conversation and emphasized what UPSACS *does* do—screen blood banks for HIV and organize outreach to female prostitutes and truck drivers. UPSACS also organizes public displays about AIDS at popular festivals and even puppet shows on the subject of HIV for schools and villages where literacy rates are low.

The classification of truck drivers as a high-risk category surprised me. Dr. Chandra explained to me that male truck drivers are away from their wives for prolonged periods and sometimes long for the physical comforts of home. Truck stops are notorious for the number of prostitutes who ply their trade with lonely drivers. An UPSACS map shows that most districts in Uttar Pradesh with high HIV infection rates lay along major trucking routes.

I asked what UPSACS was doing to educate the MSM community about condom use. Dr. Chandra answered that they were not currently doing any outreach with this community because "we do not know where to find them." I suggested that the General Post Office Park in downtown, Lucknow—a popular place for gay men to congregate and where the police arrested the Bharosa Trust's outreach worker—would be a good place to start.

When the subject of Naz International arose, the two women who comprised the Information, Education and Communication Team came to life.⁶ They told me that



A truck stop in India with warnings about AIDS.

they refused to support NFI or the Bharosa Trust during their court case because "we did not know what they were doing."

"But there are only a handful of organizations doing this type of work in Lucknow," I said. "Are you saying that you were unaware of their intention to provide outreach for the MSM community?"

"Actually," Ms. Chatravedi admitted, "we had even attended their training sessions."

"Then why did you withdraw your support after the arrest of their outreach workers?" I asked.

"Just because they are doing some good work doesn't mean that they also weren't doing some bad work as well," she countered. "I think there is evidence that there was more going on there than simply passing out condoms."

"You mean the allegation that they were running a gay brothel?" I asked.

"The police even found a list of clients," she said.

I thought about this for a moment. Could it be true? Were Shivananda Khan and Arif Jafar gay "Mayflower Madams" who were corrupting the traditional culture of Uttar Pradesh under the aegis of AIDS outreach work? Alternatively, had the police and the press summarily convicted the two men and their respective organizations of a charge that would not stand up in open court? Was there really a list of clients, as Ms. Chatravedi asserted? If so, how would a list of the Bharosa Trust's sex clients differ in appearance from a list of people to whom, for instance, the organization intended to send Christmas cards?

While I may never know the answers to these ques-

⁶ I have since wondered which woman was Miss Information and which, Miss Communication.

tions, Ms. Chatravedi's intimation that the British-based NFI was promoting illegal, high-risk sexual activity dovetails with a persistent perception of AIDS/HIV as a foreign disease. What emerged from my conversation with UPSACS was that even members of the upper echelons of the government believe that AIDS/HIV is imported from somewhere else. Dr. Chandra pointed out that Maharashtra has a higher infection rate than Uttar Pradesh. All of the senior management of UPSACS agreed that most cases of AIDS come from Bombay, where people travel for work and then "see the bright lights and misbehave."⁷

State Assembly members parroted this idea when they remarked in a recent meeting that rising AIDS infection rates in Uttar Pradesh were the result of "poor and uneducated workers going to Bombay and other states and then returning, and then spreading the disease here."⁸ For the senior management of UPSACS and the state government, it all somehow makes sense; AIDS does not originate here, and neither do high-risk populations like promiscuous or gay men. In their estimation, these are Western problems, leaking into their morally upstanding state from Europe, America and the Westernized metropolis of Bombay.

If only they would take a walk in Hazrat Begum Park after dark, I thought to myself.

Happy Endings?

Before I left the offices of Naz Foundation International, I asked Shivananda Khan and Arif Jafar about the future. Given the difficulties of working with government agencies like UPSACS and the cultural biases that make effective outreach difficult, do they see any reason to be hopeful? Shivananda answered that he considers the change in the central government in New Delhi as a positive development. Both of them felt that the new government of Manmohar Singh was more concerned with the issue of AIDS than the previous administration.

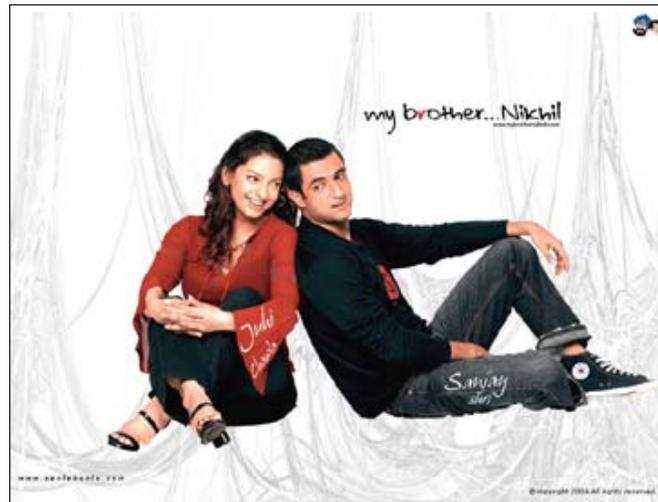
Just a few days after my interview, my wife Deborah found another reason to be hopeful. While browsing *The New York Times* website, she read a review for a Hindi film called "My Brother Nikhil," which focuses on the issues of AIDS, homosexuality and Indian culture. It is no wonder that we had to find out about the film from *The New York Times*; the Hindi and Urdu papers are silent about its existence.

With so little buzz about the film in the newspapers, it was not surprising that the picture hall was almost empty when we arrived to see the movie. Although the

small audience was a disappointment, it may have been a blessing in disguise. Earlier films about homosexuality in India, such as "Fire," a film about Indian lesbians, sparked widespread protests by religious conservatives. While few people had bought tickets to see "My Brother Nikhil" on that particular night, no one had showed up to protest the film, either.

Based on real events, "My Brother Nikhil" is a sad story about a young man in Goa who develops AIDS in the 1980s. As one of the first men diagnosed with AIDS in India, he endures humiliating treatment at the hands of a panicked state government and ends up quarantined for months in a filthy sanatorium, abandoned by his friends and family. After his release, the disease slowly destroys him and he dies in the care of his loyal sister.

Although there is no happy ending in "My Brother Nikhil," the very fact that the film was made at all is a type of progress. A Hindi movie that takes an unblinking view of AIDS, homosexuality and Indian culture could not have been made ten years ago. This new openness may be a reason for optimism. After all, effective AIDS prevention requires the acknowledgement of the existence of sexual minorities and an open attempt to promote responsible sexual behavior among them. As the case of the Lucknow Four illustrates, when public health is confused with heavy-handed public morality, the results can be disastrous. Perhaps "My Brother Nikhil" is the first sign of a change in the pre-Kinsean conception of human sexuality held by mainstream society and the state government in Uttar Pradesh. □



A film poster for the film "My Brother Nikhil." Sanjay Shri (right) plays the part of one of the first persons to be diagnosed with AIDS in India.⁹

⁷ UPSACS' literature backs up this assertion, claiming that UP has only a 0.23% infection rate among the general population and 0.85% among high-risk groups. The bad news is that Lucknow is the third highest district in the state, behind only Agra and Kanpur. *New Horizons: Making a Difference in HIV/AIDS* (UPSACS, Lucknow) pg. 9.

⁸ *Dainik Jaagaran* 3/23/05 "AIDS par Sarvadaliya Baithak Bulaayenge Mukhyamantrii" pg. 9 translated from Hindi.

⁹ Image from www.santabanta.com/wallpapers/

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Current Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

Author: Connerney, Richard D.
Title: ICWA Letters (South Asia)
ISSN: 1083-4303
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs,
Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; The Americas;
Europe/Russia; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-
Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4303) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator:
Brent Jacobson
Publications Design & Management:
Ellen Kozak

©2005 Institute of Current World Affairs,
The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

This newsletter may not be reprinted or republished without the express written consent of the Institute of Current World Affairs