

Event to aid Indian slums

By JULIE A. VARUGHESE
Norwich Bulletin

NEW LONDON -- Witnessing the unsanitary conditions of slum dwellers in India's populous cities prompted Sunil Bhatia to try to fix the problem.

Tonight, Friends of Shelter Associates, the Connecticut College chapter of the India-based nonprofit organization, will host a fund-raiser featuring a short film on the conditions and a presentation by faculty and students.

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Since last summer, the group has raised \$14,000, but hopes to raise \$26,000 more in order to buy 200 individual toilets for residents of a slum.

An estimated 600 Indians live in Norwich and Bhatia hopes those families will support the cause.

Bhatia is an associate professor of human development and chairman of the chapter's steering committee. He grew up in Indian and was aware of the problems of slum dwellers, but he believed they were too vast to fix on his own.

"There was always a sense of helplessness, of how you could intervene and improve the situation of these residents who live in these slums, where they have no basic access to facilities and basic

amenities like drinking water and so on," Bhatia said.

An estimated 700 million people, or 70 percent of India's population, lack adequate toilets, the United Nations estimated.

A trip in 2005 to India, where he witnessed how massive flooding devastated riverside slums, was the trigger for Bhatia's involvement.

He said in slums, community toilet blocks, set up by the local government, contain about 1,500 toilets. But no one takes ownership, so they are not maintained and are too dirty for anyone to use. So public defecation is performed.

"It's also an issue of human rights," Bhatia said.

He said women don't like to use blocks during the day because they get sexually harassed or abused.

IF YOU GO

- **What:** Fund-raising event by Friends of Shelter Associates, including dinner, a dance performance, skit, film presentation and faculty/student presentation.
- **When:** 6 p.m. tonight.
- **Where:** Crozier-Williams Student Center, Connecticut College, New London.
- **Cost:** The dinner is free with requests for donations. RSVPs are requested.
- **Contact:** Connecticut College Associate Professor Sunil Bhatia at 439-5078, Jyoti Ranade at jyor@hotmail.com or Adesh Saxena at adesh.m.saxena@pfizer.com

In many cases, he said the area around a block is the only space for children to play. But because sewage can leak out, the soil becomes contaminated, causing high rates of disease and mortality, he said.

Dr. Kartik Viswanathan, who practices medicine in Norwich, said he has seen the consequences of poor sanitation while volunteering in India.

"It causes diseases and causes more misery to the family, and it's a very vicious cycle," he said.

The toilets the chapter would like to donate would be individual brick-and-mortar toilets with roofs, that would be built next to each family's dwelling.

Arvind Shaw, executive director of the nonprofit Generations Health Center in Norwich, said he dug latrines and constructed drainage pipes that flowed sewage away from the slum homes when he was a teenager.

"You're not going to make any progress in Eastern Connecticut if you're not making progress in India or China or Zambia," he said. "We can't claim to be an advanced culture if we're leaving the rest of our brothers and sisters behind."

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STORYCHAT

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So the Indians were given toilets, but don't care enough to take care of them, and now they want help? Maybe they need someone to wipe their arses, too? Don't ask why the Indians who came here don't want to go back. If they had enough drive to leave India and try to make a better life for themselves, why feel bad for those who don't?

Posted: Fri Feb 16, 2007 2:24 am

"You're not going to make any progress in Eastern Connecticut if you're not making progress in India or China or Zambia," says Arvind Shaw. I don't know of any "toilet blocks" in Eastern Connecticut, and I grew up in this area.

Why is it all these Indian doctors, engineers, college professors, and other professional people come here to the U.S. for an education and stay here? Why don't they go back to India to help improve the conditions in that country, if they're so concerned about it? I'm sure that their talents could be put to good use, especially the talents of the health field professionals.

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