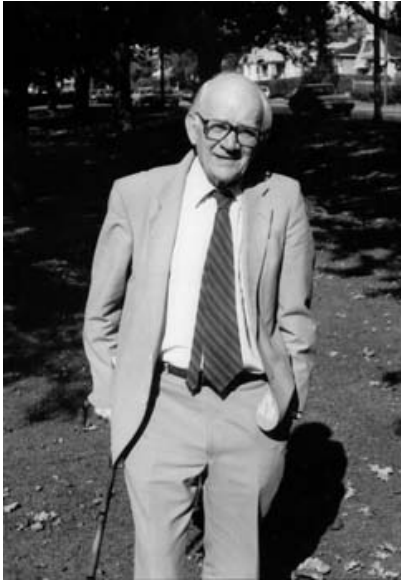




## Founding of CIVA



by George Woodcock

*Concurrent with the 1994 "Inspired by George" celebration of his 82nd birthday was the publication of the third volume of George Woodcock's autobiography, **Walking Through the Valley** (ECW Press). The following history of the founding of CIVA is condensed from several chapters and reprinted here by permission of the author.*

**It was friendship that aroused and has since in many ways supported Inge and I in what has been the main cause, outside literature, of our recent years, the small organization, unpolitical and unliterary, known as Canada India Village Aid. It all began in the early summer of 1981 when Patwant Singh emerged from our past.**

Patwant is an Indian writer and the editor of *Design*, his country's best magazine of architecture and planning. His father was one of the Sikh contractors who, under the direction of Sir Edwin Lutyens, built the dramatic complex of rose-coloured buildings in the centre of New Delhi that was designed to enshrine the authority of the British Raj as successor to all the alien rulers of India, and is now the node of power in independent India. Through a mutual friend's letter of introduction, we met Patwant Singh an hour after landing in Bombay on our first Indian journey; like many Sikhs, he was a tall man; his mobile, intelligent face was framed between a black turban and a black, carefully tended beard which I later learnt he kept in a net when he slept.

Within a week he and my old London friend **Mink Raj Anand**, now in Bombay, had introduced us to all the local writers, artists and filmmakers. A couple of weeks later, in Delhi, Patwant performed the same service all over again with almost Mogul lavishness, introducing me to most of the people we wanted to meet (though Nehru would not bite) and giving enormous parties to which everyone came because nobody wanted to be left out. There we encountered not only great Indian writers like the superb novelist and tale-teller **R.K. Narayan**, but also great foreign writers like **Octavio Paz**, who was then Mexico's ambassador to India.

Patwant's social adeptness, his extravagant self-projection, and his love of pleasure made one think of him in those days that extended over almost the first two decades of our friendship as the intelligent playboy, capable of writing a good book on Indian politics, which he did, of editing an elegant magazine for sophisticates, and of wearing his highly starched black turban in just as elegant a combination with his Gucci shoes as he skittered over the tragic aspects of Asian existence.

He mocked gently our efforts to help Tibetan refugees; he refused to admit, out of nationalist pride, that *poverty* was a word to be applied to India; and it was I, not he, who noticed that his night watchman had no shoes and was wearing the most wretched of worn-down open sandals in the bitter cold nights of a Delhi December.

About 1980, all this seemed to change dramatically, as life does so often among Indian men who approach the darker verges of middle age, and all at once become aware of the power of karma and the relation between present and future lives. Patwant suffered a heart attack. Recovering from it, he found himself considering what would have happened if he had been a peasant farmer from one of the poverty-stricken villages near his country house of Ghamroj in Haryana, sixty miles or so from Delhi. Almost certainly he would have died, for there was no hospital near enough to save him. The thought nagged, as thoughts do on sleepless hospital nights, and when he recovered Patwant went out to look at the areas near his leisure farm with a new uneasy eye. He found the villages poorer than he had assumed, the land arid, or salinated from bad irrigation; eye diseases caused largely by diet deficiency were so prevalent that any child who survived infancy had a ten-to-one chance of eventually contracting cataract or glaucoma; survival beyond infancy was itself reduced as a possibility by the high rate of gastroenteritis; tuberculosis was on the upspring among cattle and hence among human beings. The women were still in semi-purdah, living withdrawn and repressed lives inaccessible to family planning instruction, for though these people were Jats of Hindu faith, the area had been for centuries under Moslem domination.

The decisive incident came one night when Patwant was driving back to Delhi, and came upon a group of peasants at the roadside and among them a woman in agonized labour; she needed help urgently. Patwant got the peasants to load her into his car and drove to the military hospital in Delhi where he had connections; the woman's life and her child's were saved. He decided immediately to found a small hospital so that such a situation might never again occur among what he rather patriarchally regarded as his peasants.

He got to work immediately, calling in the debts of years of lavish hospitality. He badgered the state government of Haryana into giving a piece of land he specified must be barren. He persuaded architect friends to design an open campus of small pavilions to be built cheaply of local materials. He talked manufacturers into giving him beds and sheets and cement. He recruited retired army doctors to staff his hospital and charmed Delhi specialists into offering services at nominal fees. He persuaded a couple of English nurses travelling in India to stay on and help start up the hospital.

Above all, he turned to the vast, international circle of friendships he had built up in the years of pleasure and embarked on great annual pilgrimages to collect funds in Britain, the United States and especially Canada, where he tapped the consciences of lumber-rich Vancouver Indians and persuaded the **Canadian International Development Agency** that his Kabliji Hospital and Rural Health Centre was a voluntary venture worth supporting.

At this point Inge and I became involved. As old friends we were astonished at his

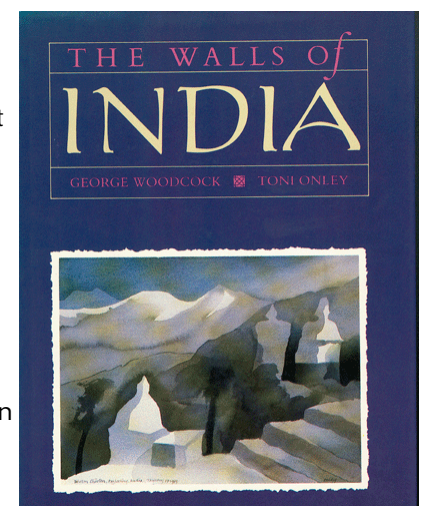
apparent transformation, but rejoiced in it. We got together some other Old India Hands, like **John and Marta Friesen**, some doctors like **Shirley Rushton** and **Douglas Forbes**, a few other friends like **Doris Shadbolt** and **Tony Phillips**, a psychologist who became our first chairman, like the accountant **Hari Varshney** who became our treasurer, like **Sarah McAlpine** and **Judy Brown** who had attended my lectures long ago at UBC and had worked with us for the Tibetans. We called the little organization we founded **Canada India Village Aid**.

Here we had our first small difference with Patwant, who wanted us to call it Friends of Kabliji, which we pointed out would be meaningless to Canadians. In any case we had been attracted to Patwant's suggestion that his experiment was replicable and we joined to that a basic philosophy drawn from Gandhi's argument that village regeneration was the real foundation of India's regeneration, an idea long and fatally neglected by Indian politicians. We hoped the opportunities would come—and they quickly did—for us to extend our help beyond Patwant Singh's experiment. In fact Canada India Village Aid became a [major] factor in our lives . . . .

Among the people who joined Canada India Village Aid was the painter **Toni Onley**, whom I had known desultorily for a long time. Having watched us working at banquets and book sales to bring in money at a time when all charities were complaining of declining donations, Toni remarked: "It looks to me as if you're piddling away your time to earn a few dollars, George. Why don't you and I go to India together? I'll paint, you can write, we'll put a book together, and sell the paintings for CIVA into the bargain."

Inge and I agreed immediately, and Toni's wife Yukiko was game for the trip. We got out our maps and planned a trip with destinations that emphasized the great contrasts of India, that continent masquerading as a country. Starting from Delhi, our general base, we would proceed to the desert realms of Rajasthan, and then swing back to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, the Mogul heartland. Tony Phillips and his friend **Margo Palmer** would accompany us thus far. The rest of us would fly southward via Bombay to Kerala, where I had once stayed long enough to write a book, and stand on the tip of India at Kanniyakumari. From Trivandrum we would then go northward over the Deccan to Orissa with its multitude of ancient temples in Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konarak. Continuing north through Calcutta, we would climb to Darjeeling with its Himalayan vistas and mountain way of life, and thence return to Delhi and so, via Burma, home.

It was an itinerary that seemed to encompass the variety of India, its contrasts of terrain and climate, its contrasts also of culture that divided it like the walls of its ancient buildings, and would give the title to the book I would write at the end of it all, *Walls of India*. But first we would visit Kabliji, which had given us the reason for our trip .... A welcoming party around the great central fireplace of Patwant's apartment, another in the Canadian High Commission, and we were on our journey, travelling by Ghamrog, where the



Kabliji Hospital had been build, on a secondary way to Jaipur.

It was the kind of hopeless countryside Inge and I already knew from having wandered there in 1961 with Gandhian volunteers, and, like most things in India, it had got worse. The dusty soil, exhausted by three millennia of cultivation since the Aryans moved down from the mountains now grew stunted maize and sugar cane four feet high. The peasants' abode houses were so near to literal mud huts that often we would be aware of a village only when we were about to enter it. When we reached the hospital, in its patch of salty, scrubby land, it had the same low-squatting look, the walls of its hexagonal buildings clad in fieldstone outside and whitewash within and roofed with lichened tiles from old British bungalows. Sitting on the beds in the wards, huddled under their grey-white cotton cloaks, the sick peasants were able to look out at eye level on fields like their own, where teams of oxen limped to and fro, dragging wooden plows like those used by Roman farmers two thousand years ago.

We stayed our first night on the road at Patwant's luxuriously spartan grange and realized that the presence of the hospital had begun to transform the life of the countryside, at least in the villages from which the patients came. The squalor one sees normally in villages near the Junna was partially mitigated. Open, fly-encrusted drains had been covered over, ancient infected wells had been relined.

An energetic Sikh lady, Mehtab Singh, had lured women out of their purdah, and in a couple of big old granges deserted by absentee landlords, we heard the clatter of handmade looms and the lighter chatter of knitting machines. We halted in doorways decorated with ancient patterns of moulded plaster, and lifted our joined hands in *namaskar*, as we waited for the women in their bright red and yellow best saris to garland us with sacred marigolds, and dot our brows with auspicious red powder, and offer us sweet chunks of *burfi*. Then they would invite us in to see the work that had changed their lives.

In the open courtyards hung with the bright dhurries woven there, we found women of all ages at work: teenage girls at the knitting machines, mature women at the looms, old women preparing yarn for dyeing and weaving. Within a few months of the looms appearing, the last vestiges of purdah had vanished in a quiet village revolution, and the women had begun to assume active roles in local life. The age of marriage had risen steadily, from fourteen or fifteen to nineteen or twenty, as young girls realized they now had earning powers. This meant an immediate dramatic fall in the local birthrate. Even the status of widows, traditional pariahs in Indian villages, had improved since the hospital began to employ them as aides and had given them a status in the community.

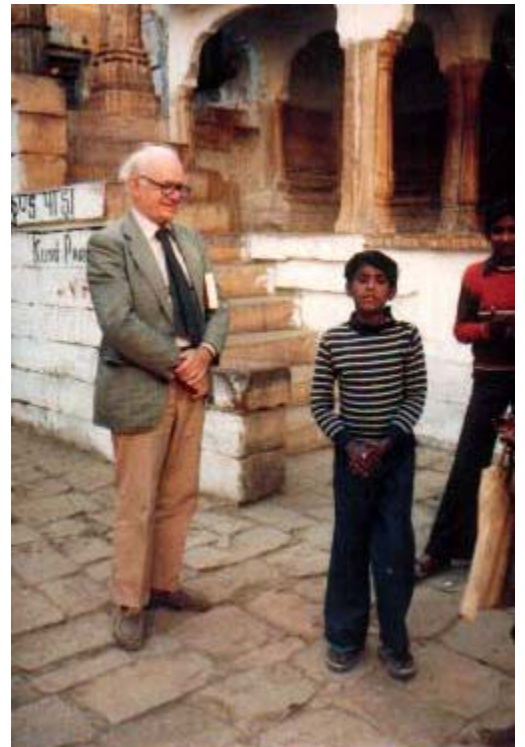
As we drove out of the compound at **Kabliji**, a cart drawn by white oxen with blue-painted horns was coming in: a man lay wrapped almost to his eyes in a dirt-grey cotton cloth, so that we could not tell his age, but the woman who squatted beside him on the jolting floor of the cart held the fold of her faded green sari over her face, leaving only her eyes visible; she was one of the old school. Whatever was wrong with the man—and the boy driving the cart shrugged when our driver asked him—he had a hope that would not have existed before Kabliji was built.

Yet I took away a sense of unease. The hospital was run well and there was need for it. But I found something disturbingly patriarchal about its arrangements. The hierarchical style of a Western hospital, here accentuated by the presence of military doctors, did not accord with my Gandhian visions of popular involvement. I had not been reassured when I asked Patwant whether he was training paramedics, and he replied flippantly, "I don't want any of those fellows flapping their dirty dhoties around my place!" The possessiveness, the eliteness, disturbed me, and would influence my views when later on I encountered more popular and democratic models of medical activity in rural India ....

## Running CIVA

We were much involved in the middle 1980s [with] the development of Canada India Village Aid, which we ran as an entirely voluntary society, operating by consensus, with no paid staff and no voting, a small and successful example of libertarian organization. We were making contacts with groups in India who operated in similar ways, and notably with Seva Mandir to whom we were introduced by John Friesen. Operating from Udaipur and working among tribal peoples—notably the Bhils, Seva Mandir strengthened our belief in an approach based on helping the people pick their own goals and helping them achieve them; there was nudging, shall we say, but not shoving.

Through our contact with Seva Mandir we began to turn away from authoritarian doctor-oriented approaches towards more libertarian approaches based on recruiting villagers to accept training as health workers and then sending them back among their own people. Our first major effort was actually a training scheme of this kind, which produced a significant improvement in local treatment of sicknesses, in public health, and even in nutrition through the encouragement of composting and kitchen gardens. When a drought began in the areas of Rajasthan where Seva Mandir operated, we expanded into the environmental area, forming a partnership between Seva Mandir, which provided the technical



services, the villagers who offered their labour, the Indian government which opened its granaries to compensate them, and we who provided the cash for buying the stone and cement (an expensive commodity in India) and transporting it. We built ten dams, each of which served a thousand people and their animals as it filled with ground water and the occasional rain.

From the beginning we relied a great deal on the community of the arts, with which

Inge and I had close and personal connections, to help us in fund-raising. **Toni Onley's** act of making paintings in India for us to sell in Canada was only one—though a great one—of these gestures. Through the summer of 1984 we worked on an Indian festival for the autumn. We had the cooperation of the India Music Society, with which we collaborated in importing an Orissa dancer and a noted India sitarist; Pacific Cinémathèque Pacifique, where Russell Wodell put on Indian films during the week; the Vancouver Art Gallery which hosted an exhibition of Toni Onley's Indian paintings, and **Xisa Huang** of the **Bau-xi Gallery** who did the same for a show of paintings donated by artists from all over Canada, including **Alex Colville, Tony Urquhart** and **Ivan Eyre** as well as the current Vancouver masters; finally, we held a great book sale, and with all this and a generous grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), we were able to start our training scheme.

The artists, including the writers, continued to support us over the years, and two years afterwards we organized a nationwide poetry competition. Two poets who lived in Vancouver (**George Bowering** and **George McWhirter**) joined us in organizing the event and giving a first reading of the thousands of poems, good and bad, that poured in. **Margaret Atwood, Al Purdy** and I were the final judges, and the whole affair culminated in a poetry reading in 1988 organized by **Greg Gatenby** at Harbourfront, where Margaret and Al and I read in company with John Pass, the first-prize winner, and the other five winners. The poetry contest, with a considerable supplement from CIDA, enabled us to build our ten dams in Rajasthan, around which Seva Mandir contoured the land and planted trees chosen for shade and fruit and forage. When he saw the first photographs of the dams, George Bowering said, "Now, *that* is concrete poetry." The winning poems were eventually published in *Dry Wells of India: An Anthology against Thirst*, which **Howard White** brought out and Margaret Atwood introduced.

Two years later the same group, Bowering and McWhirter, Inge and I, would launch a similar competition for anecdotes, led to the idea by an evening drinking Bushmills when the tales flowed free. What we found was that poetry, despite the recent craze for oral readings, remains a written art with thousands of people treasuring manuscripts, while the anecdote is essentially an oral art and—surprisingly—a shy one, for people are rarely inclined to put on paper the tales they tell. So we had a far more limited response than we had from the poets two years before and in order to make a good anthology this time (*The Great Canadian Anecdote Contest*) I had to invite my friends in the literary world, such as **Margaret Atwood** and **Timothy Findley, Ronald Wright** and **Dorothy Livesay, Julian Symons** and **Eric Wright**, to send us their tales as guest writers. They responded generously, and so a good book finally appeared, with **George McWhirter's** introduction.

For me one of the splendid features of our work with Canada India Village Aid was the way it created or extended friendships, which I believe was due to the open style of our organization, our persistence in discussion until consensus was reached, and there was never any anger of the defeated at the end of our voteless meetings. Some of the people involved were old friends like **Doris Shadbolt, John and Marta Friesen**, and the psychologist **Tony Phillips**. Toni Onley had come in because of our travels together. **Russell Wodell**, whom I had known years before in

connection with a [Victoria weekly magazine] eventually became our secretary, after I had abandoned the task, and **Amir Mitha**, an Ismaili accountant from Uganda, joined us as treasurer after he had worked with us through the India Music Society.

**Trish LaNauze**, a theatrical publicist, came to help with an early book sale and stayed on to become a director and play a major role in India Week. Judy Brown had been one of my students at UBC decades before, and we renewed our friendship in work together. **Keath Fraser** was a fellow writer who one day approached me with a proposal to prepare an anthology of travel writings, which he would edit and usher through the publishing process. It was to be called *Worst Journeys (Bad Trips for the Americans)* and Keath brought in an amazing variety of writers willing to forego their royalties for CIVA. The book in fact became a best-seller, and up to now has contributed more than \$70,000 to CIVA's funds.

And finally, there was **Sarah McAlpine**, whom I had known in her student days when she came to audit my European Literature course at UBC. She became one of the most active workers for CIVA and eventually its president, and she also became, over the years, one of my closest friends, a person of great vitality and variety, loyalty and generosity.

**George Woodcock,**  
**1994**



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