

The Manthan Journey

One day in July 2005, M R Vikram and I, long-time friends, decided that we stop complaining about the lack of intellectual enterprise in the city and put our thoughts in action - and then, well, Manthan was born.

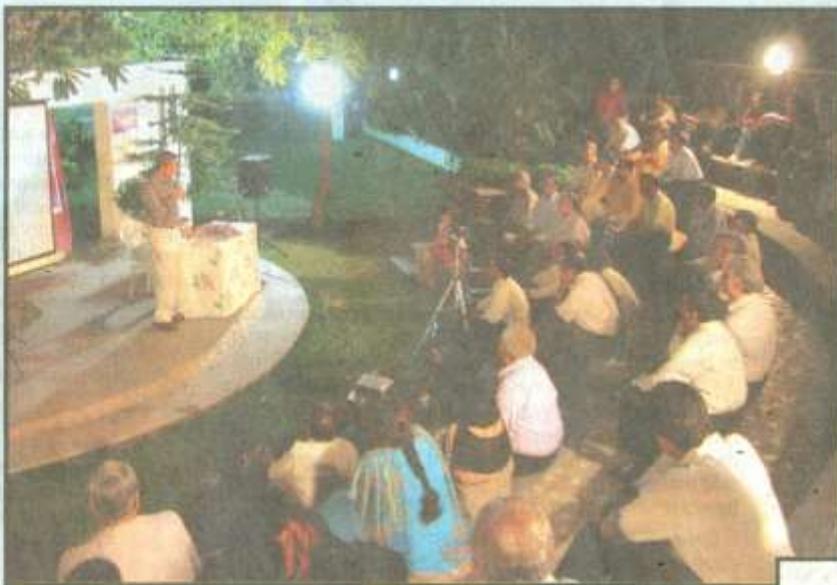
Manthan literally means churning, a mother's 'manthan' to extract butter from out of buttermilk. This Manthan was to be one of thoughts and ideas.

It was a rainy evening in August 2005 with complete power outage when Manthan got kicked off by Shantha Sinha, Magsasay awardee. The talk by Prof Aditya Mukherjee on post-independence economic history, in candle light and to a packed audience, set the tone for future manthans. It has been an invigorating time since then - despite anxieties and difficulties.

The Manthan model is simple: get a thought leader and place him or her in front of the members. After a talk of about an hour, the speaker and the audience involves in intense, no-holds barred manthan (debate) of ideas. Pure exhilaration.

So many outstanding people have had an evening of manthan with us. Our members have participated in debates with people like Dr P M Bhargava, Justice Raghuram, Javed Akhtar, Dr Jayaprakash Narayan, Subroto Bagchi, Prof Trilochan Sastry, Dr Thomas Bak, Barun Mitra, Prof Rajen Harshe, Prof Aditya Mukherjee, Prof Mridula Mukherjee, Dr Evita Fernandes, Dr Sudhakar Krishnamurti, Mani Shankar and many others.

Members have enjoyed debates on a wide



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variety of subjects. Dr Jaysprakash Narayan - on reservations policy and Indian polity in the 21st century. Prof Trilochan Sastry - on recent successes in improving democracy. Dr P M Bhargava on atheism - that God was man's creation; and on homophobia being a great fraud. Justice Raghuram's scholarly views on judicial activism. Dr Bak on what Europe can learn from In-

dia. Javed Akhtar recited poetry and had a free-flowing interactive session. Additionally, even topics like democracy, sex, naxalism, ethics in medicine, Kashmir, films etc. The annual Budget Analyses bring the Union Budget to the citizens the same evening as the Budget is presented and

are a big draw.

The simple model of Manthan works well. Easy membership. No-nonsense, fixed format, no-delay meetings in an intimate ambience. Vibrant, intense debates. Members love it.

As important as the meetings, continuous debates go on among the members on the internet. The Manthan Yahoo Group is a platform to members to freely, and at length, debate various issues, often in parallel. Many thoughts, ideas and issues are debated on the group which is not possible in the physical meetings. Committed manthanites ensure that debates on a variety of subjects is always on.

It was obvious that there were enough people who had similar interests and would love to be part of an activity offering intellectual stimulation. But to find a great, vibrant, eager group of members was heartening. And to see them doing passionate debates with speakers for long hours was amazing. Members include professionals and businessmen, housewives and students, bureaucrats, executives and the retired - of all ages and from all walks of life.

Like good things in life, membership to Manthan is free, and open to all.

Hopefully, Manthan has provided Hyderabad a forum for public discourse and intellectual activity. But



Ajay Gandhi

these are small steps to what ought to be a way of life for a modern society.

There are various challenges: to keep getting high quality speakers; to keep quality debates going on the net; to fine tune and create a low-cost replicable model; to get new 'owners' to drive similar initiatives elsewhere - in schools, colleges, companies, communities and regions.

One hopes that the Manthan spirit spreads wide and encourages continuous learning, open debates, and public discourse towards an informed, liberal civil society.

Manthan is run by the Manthan Foundation, a non-profit trust. It was founded and is managed by Ajay Gandhi and M R Vikram, both chartered accountants by profession.

Manthan may be reached on the web at www.manthanindia.com.

By invitation- Ajay Gandhi