
Interview: P.R. Dasgupta

AIDS could lead to economic collapse

During her investigation of AIDS in India, Madhu Gurung spoke with P.R. Dasgupta, project director of the National AIDS Control Organization, which handles the government program on prevention of AIDS in India. Dasgupta admitted that the basic data which could provide an insight into how volatile the AIDS situation is in India is inadequate. A strong believer in the "safe sex" campaign of the World Health Organization, he is in the process of launching a poster campaign on the subject. Asked if the advice would keep a person 100% safe, his comment was that the person would be "reasonably safe."

EIR: You have many posters out that say that AIDS cannot be spread by close contact such as hugging, kissing, through toilet seats, and so forth. Our readers want to know, if a person follows what your posters say, are they 100% safe? Is the information you are giving really complete?

Dasgupta: We have identified particular risk behavior groups, and if the person keeps away from all these risk behaviors, I would say he is reasonably safe. It is like having precautionary medicine for a cold before you really get it, to be reasonably safe.

EIR: How would you identify those who are infected, and how many more have these people infected? Do you have any figures on that?

Dasgupta: Identification is possible by two tests—Elisa and Western Blot. There is no scientific way to find out how many others a person has infected. It is difficult to say. One can only speculate for sex workers [prostitutes].

EIR: How many prostitutes have been screened so far in India and how many persons frequent these prostitutes each day in a major city such as Delhi or Bombay?

Dasgupta: There has been sporadic screening in Bombay and Calcutta. There is no way of doing this, because much of it is underground and is dispersed and diffused.

EIR: Once you identify a person as HIV positive, what preventive measures are taken? Is the government looking after the full-blown AIDS cases? Are they given free medical treatment?

Dasgupta: On preventive measures, it is very general. We identify certain risk behavior groups. Identification and pre-

ventive measures are not necessarily related; they go side by side. On treating AIDS victims, the treatment for these persons in government hospitals is more or less free and subsidized. No special distinction is made, however, toward the AIDS cases.

EIR: You said that identification is done through Elisa and Western Blot tests. How many of these test kits are available at any given time? Is it not time now for India to manufacture these testing kits indigenously and not depend on foreign imports?

Dasgupta: We have about 162 AIDS centers in India. The exact number of Elisa testing kits available will be 200-300. Elisa is run in batches of 40-60 samples. For smaller centers, we provide rapid testing kits.

On the issue of indigenously manufacturing test kits, there are 26 offers currently before the Department of Biotechnology for taking up manufacture. The Department of Biotechnology and the Indian Council of Medical Research are doing a multi-subject study to find out how these kits perform under Indian conditions. It is possible that some of them will take up manufacture, but it is not easy to manufacture these kits and a lot depends on the availability of Indian antigens. Perhaps the technological breakthrough in this respect has not yet been made in this country. So, it will have to be developed with foreign collaboration, but there are good possibilities in the near future.

EIR: How big a threat is AIDS in the next 5-10 years? What is the growth rate of AIDS you foresee during this period? Is there any parliamentary group which considers AIDS a threat to India?

Dasgupta: It will be just a wild guess on my part as there is no basis with which I can justify, particularly as this question does not serve any purpose. It is not necessary to speculate on the number. What is necessary to comprehend is that it is a reality.

We have a consultative committee of members of Parliament attached to the Ministry of Health and they discuss all health and family related matters. We had about three meetings on AIDS.

EIR: The debilitating health problem that AIDS brings also causes problems to the country's economy. What do you think are the economic consequences of AIDS?

Dasgupta: We are scared that if we try to make a calculation about economic consequences, we will find a horrendous future waiting for us. The simple reason is that if we take into account the sexually active population, which is most vulnerable to AIDS, we must realize that this group provides the backbone to any country's work force. Whether it is the organized or unorganized sector, if it breaks out at an exponential rate within this group, in the manner in which it occurred in Africa, it can lead to a similar economic collapse. . . .