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Where India Shines - Prisoner of Agenda

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In the summer of 1978, I took a train to Piparia in Madhya Pradesh. As far as I could tell, it was the middle of nowhere. I was straight out of school and was headed for a small village nearby. My parents had insisted I work for a few months with an NGO called Kishor Bharati which, with the Friends Rural Centre, had started a science teaching programme in rural Madhya Pradesh.

There were engineers, scientists and doctors at the centre, from all over the country. The pay must have been miserable, if there was any. The amenities were basic: common toilets, water pumps or wells for bathing, simple meals and none of the tools we have today. I remember Arvind Gupta from IIT Kanpur, a lean, tall, bearded man who seemed to care for only two things: science and children. These people were there to bring science into villages, to develop 'a scientific temper'.

The project had to work to a prescribed syllabus. That meant bringing into the lives of village children alien concepts and objects, things I took for granted. Those Camlin compass box sets, for example, with their little rulers, dividers and compass. Arvind fashioned a divider out of a piece of string and two sharpened twigs and then went out to explain to the children how to use it. I think he related it to water — using it to draw a circle in the dust, the site for a future well.

I've lost touch with Arvind since; that's entirely my loss. I believe he works at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune. He is said to be a popularizer of science, but calls himself a toy inventor. His website has a wonderful range of toys made from everyday household objects, all designed to bring science, mathematics and astronomy into children's lives. His passions remain undimmed.

Despite all its problems, or perhaps because of them, India is a country of countless men and women like Arvind, working individually or with voluntary organisations of every stripe, from the dentist in Ooty who works with indigenous peoples to the doctors from Mumbai and Delhi in Chhattisgarh and the lawyers, architects and planners in city slums. Many work against terrible odds in appalling conditions and for next to nothing in financial terms. They wouldn't dream of doing anything else.