

SANDEEP PANDEY

It was 1992 and Sandeep Pandey was on the fast track. The mechanical engineer from India with master's degrees in manufacturing and computer science from Syracuse University had just completed his doctorate in control theory at the University of California in Berkeley. He was a rising star in a hot field. Control theory is an area of application-oriented mathematics that deals with the basic principles underlying systems as diverse as robotics, missile technology, space flight and consumer electronics. Just 27, Pandey had an assured future in American industry. But he chose to accept a high-paying job as a lecturer in control theory at the Indian Institute of Technology. And then he turned his back on academe for a hardscrabble life as a social activist.

Ten years on, the former scientist has clearly found his calling. After helping to establish schools that teach impoverished children real-life skills and inculcate values for social justice, Pandey is broadening his remit to the larger task of shaping India's social, economic and political future. He has spoken out against a government plan to make Hinduism a central ideology in state schools, denounced militarist nationalism that is pitting India against Pakistan, and led a 1,500-kilometer Global Peace March protesting India's nuclear arms program in 1999. "The most dangerous thing happening in India today is the glorification of violence," he says. "The situation at the border of Pakistan has worsened since we carried out nuclear tests [in 1998]. The chances of complete devastation [from the use of atomic weapons] have grown much stronger."

Few people who knew Pandey as a child would have guessed that the boy would grow up to be a firebrand. Born to a middle-class family on July 22, 1965, Pandey had an upbringing normal to his class. His father, Uma Shanker Pandey, was an official with the Indian Railways while his mother, Uma Upadhyaya Pandey, stayed at home. Both parents belonged to the Brahmin caste, the priestly group that sits atop India's traditional caste system. Pandey never knew his paternal grandfather—all but his father, his father's mother and an uncle died in an epidemic when his father was four. But his mother belonged to an extensive and prominent land-owning rural clan. "One member was the first Indian city magistrate in Benares," Pandey recalls. His maternal grandfather was himself a senior bureaucrat with the provincial civil service of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state. "So my mother grew up in a privileged situation in a city environment."

Deprived of most of his family, his father struggled to make something of himself. He was a good and hard-working student and was accepted to Roorkee University in Uttar Pradesh. Now part of the famed Indian Institute of Technology group, Roorkee was the first engineering college set up by the British in 1847. After completing his civil engineering degree, Uma Shanker joined the Indian Railways, which operates Asia's largest train network. Being a civil servant confers prestige and a lot of perks in India. As a Brahmin as well, Uma Shanker was deemed suitable to marry into Uma Upadhyaya's family. The young couple set up a home wherever Uma Shanker was assigned as the civil engineer was periodically transferred to take charge of the Railways' bridges and train tracks. Sandeep Pandey was the eldest of their three surviving children. A son died in childhood.

The Pandey kids grew up in a succession of high-ceilinged colonial houses built for the Railways by the British when they ruled India. The residences were fully staffed by government-employed domestic help. "We had gardeners, a person to help with the cooking and so on," says Pandey. The family enjoyed a comfortably middle class lifestyle, with access to good schools and health care facilities. But the young Pandey was by no means spoiled. His father was a disciplinarian. "He would not tolerate any nonsense," Pandey says. "He would lose his temper. We were punished at times, but never physically." Uma Shanker insisted that the children concentrate on their studies. "He was an intelligent person," says Pandey. "If he saw something wrong in public, especially corruption, he would speak up. I probably got [that trait] from him."

His mother, Uma Upadhyaya, had a taste for art. She liked to embroider and do handicraft. "She was a good singer," says Pandey. "My father would not take these things very seriously, but my mother would definitely go out of the way to encourage me to participate in [artistic] activities. When I was growing up, she completed her Bachelor of Arts degree." Uma Upadhyaya observed Hindu rituals religiously. "She

would take us to religious festivals,” her son remembers. “My mother and grandmother also would narrate stories from Hindu mythology and we would be given a lot of books to read.” Among them were picture books on historical and mythological figures, part of the popular series Anar Chitra Katat. “In some of these readings, I got influenced by the lives of people like Gandhi and the Buddha. The one thing I remember very clearly are the characters that make some kind of sacrifice, who would give up something to live a simple life and live up to very high moral principles.” At one point, Pandey thought of changing his name to Mohan Gautam in honor of Gandhi and the Buddha.

Encouraged to read by both parents, Pandey was something of a bookworm. He learned other lessons in primary school in Samasdipur, where the Railways stationed his father. Located near the border with Nepal, the small town was in the backwash of smuggling and other criminal activities. “The gang wars between different families would be taken to the schools by the children,” Pandey recalls. “Some of my classmates would bring weapons and after classes they would fight at times. I saw some violence at a very small age, and that definitely had an influence on me.” The young boy also witnessed instances of sexual harassment, such as men on bicycles and motorbikes touching women walking on the road. “I would be helpless in the situation,” says Pandey. “I thought I should be powerful enough to intervene and stop that kind of oppression and abuse. That’s where the urge to intervene came from.”

Things were more settled in the larger town of Ghuratpur, where Pandey completed his elementary grades, and in the city of Lucknow, where he was born and where he finished high school. But the boy continued to march to his own drum. “I never liked competition, so irrespective of how much pressure my parents or teachers would bring on me, I could never study for the sake of getting good marks,” he says. “I just went at my own pace. I would rather go slow but have a good hold on whatever I was doing rather than cover more material with the intention of scoring good marks in the exam.” His father insisted on Pandey waking early to study because that was how Uma Shanker got good grades. “I’d be woken up by my mother but I’d go back to sleep,” says Pandey. “I was just accommodating to their wishes. The environment at home was such that I had to put in some time into my studies. The reason I liked art and sports is that they were breaks from my studies.”

He won some drawing competitions and was named to his high school cricket team. “I played in the regional level,” says Pandey. He wasn’t a very powerful bowler, but he could bat well and had the tenacity of the long-distance runner. In swimming and athletics, he would compete in the longer distances. While he did not have the speed, he had the staying power to complete a 20-kilometer run. “The other competitors would drop out, but I would go on and on and on,” Pandey laughs. “Sometimes the people overseeing the event would get frustrated. I would never be the first one to finish, but because there would only be one or two runners left, I would get a prize.”

Pandey applied his tenacity to his studies in his final two years in high school to pass the national exams for university admission. He was accepted to the renowned Benares Hindu University in the holy city of Varanasi to study engineering, a prestigious profession that together with medicine represented the ideal career for the middle class. “My father being an engineer it was quite natural for me to select engineering,” he says. “I went into the chemical engineering undergraduate program, but changed my major in my first year to mechanical engineering just because everybody advised me that mechanical engineering and civil engineering were more universal.” His father wanted him to join the civil service, a prestigious and traditional career route for engineering students. “He had this ambition of making me an Indian administrative officer,” says Pandey. “I wasn’t particularly keen on it, but then I didn’t know what [I wanted] to do.”

College was an eye-opener for the 17-year-old Pandey. It was the first time he was away from his family. “Initially I did not like it because at home everything is taken care of,” he says. “You get good food and a nice and clean environment.” In university, he had to share a room and make do with cafeteria meals. There was also the tradition of ragging by upper classmen. “I was verbally abused and you’re not supposed to answer or fight back.” But there was a new freedom, too. “We would cycle at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning all the way outside the campus to have tea,” he remembers. “There was no pressure from any elder to study, but the discipline that was inculcated [early on] was obviously there as a matter of habit and therefore I continued to do well. I was never at the top, but I managed to do well in exams.”

But the conviction that he was not cut out to be an engineer was growing. Practical training was part of the curriculum, and Pandey spent six weeks each in the shock absorbers division of motorcycle maker Escort and at Hindustan Aeronautics. The experience made it clear to him that he did not want to work in industry. "It was very routine and there was no possibility for any creativity." At the same time, he got reacquainted with the life of one of his childhood heroes. Reading Gandhi's autobiography for the first time, Pandey felt a rekindling of his dream to make a difference. "It was after going through his entire biography that the decision that I would be dedicating my life to social causes full time was taken. His life deeply influenced me. I was able to get some inspiration and some direction also as to the manner in which I would begin my social activism. I had only to wait for an opportune moment, because I did not have the courage to defy my father's wishes."

As a first step, Pandey decided in his final year to run for representative of his college, known as the Institute of Technology, in the student union elections. He came in seventh for the eight contested positions. Despite his victory, the experience left a bitter taste. It was a dirty election. "All the major universities had become breeding grounds for [national and state] politicians," explains Pandey. "Student leaders used university politics as stepping stone for higher politics. Anybody who has held the top key positions in the student union is usually guaranteed a ticket for contesting a seat in the state assembly or the national assembly. A political party would immediately take you on board and offer you a ticket. In some cases, you find students who hang around for more than 10 years to make their political career." The parties support their student wings with money and muscle power. Sometimes independent candidates like Pandey do well, but it is usually the party-backed candidates who win.

Pandey was appalled by the hypocrisy. Some of his fellow Brahmin candidates, students he expected to be above reproach as members of the priestly caste, offered him a disturbing quid pro quo. "Put very simply, if you want to be elected we can help you win, but you have to help with the votes in return." They promised to give out cinema tickets, alcohol, even access to prostitutes. "I became conscious of the caste factor for the first time in my life," says Pandey. "I decided that politics was not my cup of tea, but I had filed my nomination and I was elected. People knew me well knew me as a good human being at heart and so they supported me. But I stopped going to the student union meetings after going there for a few times." The man who was elected student union president was already a contractor with linkages to businessmen and possibly criminals. "It was almost impossible for me to imagine working with them."

Pandey left for the U.S. after graduation. His father approved, but harbored the hope that his son would return and become a civil service administrative officer. Pandey had other ideas. "Because of my disillusionment with politics [at university], I went to the U.S. with an open mind and I thought that if I would like the place I would probably stay there," he says. While his teachers at Syracuse University made him realize that engineering could be creative and intellectually satisfying, Pandey did not like the American lifestyle. People tended to put their career ahead of relationships. "I came from a place where even if you have an exam the next day, your friends can go to your room at three in the morning. There was the possibility of messing up your exam, but that was not as important as honoring your relationships. You would be sitting for hours discussing matters related to personal life to international politics without any constraint. This is unthinkable in the United States."

He stayed in America long enough to complete two master's degrees in Syracuse and his doctorate in control theory at the University of California. While still in Berkeley in 1991, Pandey and two friends, V.J.P. Srivatsavoy and Deepak Gupta, formed Asha (Hope), an organization that sought to tap the resources of overseas Indians to support the education of impoverished children back home. "It struck me one fine day as I was finishing my PhD that although what I was doing was interesting, I could not imagine myself playing with non-linear equations all my life," Pandey says of his decision to devote some of his time to charity work. "I began to question my life and what I was doing with it."

In its first year, Asha raised the considerable sum of US\$10,000 from individual contributions as low as US\$5. "Our single biggest check was for only US\$200," says Pandey. In addition to students from India, Asha attracted support from second generation Hindi-Americans on campus. Pandey forged links with this community while working as a Hindi teaching assistant to a professor in the Department of South and

Southeast Asian Studies. “A group of 30-40 members was established during the course of one year,” recalls Pandey. “It was a very strong, vibrant group and because it was mostly based on personal relationships, it had a very family-like bonding.” Asha today has 36 chapters in campuses across the U.S. and other places.

Pandey dates his political education to his years at Berkeley. In linking up with various groups, he met leaders of the Khalistan movement, which seeks to establish a separate homeland for India’s Sikhs. He learned about the Berkeley of the 1960s, when students staged violent protests against the Vietnam War. In between doing research, writing and defending his thesis, he attended campus meetings on gay and lesbian rights, animal rights and other minority rights. He became a vegan after hearing a lecture on the topic. He also heard stories about bomb scares in the Department of Computer Science and Department of Electrical Engineering. “I came to know that a lot of the research that was going on [had something to do with] the Star Wars program and that it was the KGB [Moscow’s secret police] that was trying to plant these bombs.”

It came as a shock to the rather naïve young man. “I always thought that the academic pursuit was a noble pursuit,” says Pandey. “It was impossible for me to think that what I was asked to study or to do as part of my academic exercise could be anything other than noble and that I would be part of a system that was actually going to produce arms that would kill people. That the United States would be using those arms to subjugate Third World countries, including countries like India, was very shocking to me. I decided that as soon as I had the choice, I would dissociate myself from this subject area.” The 1991 Gulf War also erupted at this time, reinforcing Pandey’s anti-militarist bent.

He returned to India in 1992 to take up a teaching post at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kanpur, about 80 kilometers from Lucknow. The IITs – there are seven – are the country’s most prestigious science universities. “I was a professor,” he recalls. “I was earning a salary for the first time in my life. I felt very independent. And the IIT atmosphere was also very conducive. It’s supposed to offer the most intellectually independent atmosphere to its professors.” He asked to work on something innocuous like alternative energy, which could not be used against human beings, instead of control theory because it had applications in defense. But Pandey was persuaded to teach his specialization because no one else at the university was qualified to handle the subject.

Soon, however, IIT officials were nonplussed by the recruit’s unorthodox teaching ideas. “I declared that in the tradition of the Gandhian way of thinking, the role of a professor is to teach and make the student understand what he is teaching,” says Pandey. “It is not his duty at all to conduct exams and declare his students ‘pass or fail.’ If a student fails in a subject, then the failure is that of the professor, not of the student. It clearly means that the professor is not able to communicate the subject well.” He was prevailed upon to conduct examinations. But Pandey said he would give oral exams, which would allow him to interact with students, who were given the option of taking and retaking the test as many times as they wanted if they felt they had not given their best.

To make students feel more comfortable, Pandey conducted the exam in the dormitories. “I went to their rooms and spent about 15 minutes with everybody,” he says. Some in his first class of 45 final year mechanical engineering students took the exam three times, but that was the most number of attempts. “Except for four students who were not interested in the subject at all, everybody did well in the course,” says Pandey. “Most of the students got As or Bs, and these four got Cs. I was totally against failing anybody because my philosophy was that if somebody was not interested in a particular subject, why should he or she be forced to go through it? Maybe they are interested in something else and they would do better in other subjects.”

His system disturbed the normal distribution of grades followed by the other professors. “There was a two-hour discussion in my department,” Pandey recalls. “Most of the senior professors declared that I could not carry on with this kind of experiment because it was such a subjective way of evaluating. What would happen if a student complained and said he or she did not get a grade that he or she deserved?” There were other sources of friction. Pandey gave the code to the combination lock in his home to about 50 students, who could get into his residence anytime they wanted. He started wearing informal Indian clothes instead

of Western attire. "Other professors thought I was lowering the dignity and status which was associated with them."

His most serious infraction may have been a four-day fast he staged to express solidarity with some workers who went on strike against the university. Instead of employing the workers directly, IIT Kanpur subcontracted a company to do the maintenance work around the campus. This firm paid its employees only where there was a job for them to do. So when the company did not win a contract to whitewash IIT's buildings, its workers effectively lost their livelihood. "The contract system was used to exploit these workers," says Pandey. His contract was not renewed and he left IIT Kanpur in 1993 after teaching and doing research for 18 months.

By then Pandey had made up his mind to become a social activist. A few months into his contract at IIT Kanpur, Hindu militants razed the Babri mosque in the holy city of Ayodhya. Riots broke out as hotheads in the Muslim community fought back. Pandey mobilized IIT students to collect food, clothes and medicine for the victims of the violence. He furthered the political self-education of his Berkeley days by founding a street theater group that spoke up against communalism and meeting with leading Indian activist groups. "I inadvertently went to some of the right-wing groups, so in effect I had seen group from right to left [of the ideological spectrum]." Pandey also visited *Narmada Bacho Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement), which was working against the construction of a series of dams meant to tame the Narmada river. The project threatened to displace hundreds of thousands of people.

The question was which cause to champion. Pandey could have continued with Asha, but he had begun to entertain misgivings about its effectiveness. "Asha was going to raise funds to put [poor] children into the same educational system which was not going to guarantee any bright future for them," Pandey explains. "In fact, they would be quite doomed because they would be leaving their work which was earning them some livelihood." He estimates that only 5% of Indians who have gone through the mainstream educational system actually get a good job. Pandey also believes that those who went through the education mill tend to be more insensitive toward their fellows. "It troubled me that we would be putting all these children who would otherwise be more humane into an education system [that would] desensitize them."

Things fell in place when Pandey met Nagraj, a man from a scholarly Hindu family who spent 22 years meditating in Amarkantak, the source of the mystical Narmada River. "He came up with his own body of knowledge which I think is a new development in the Indian system of philosophy," says Pandey. "He believes in the independent existence of physical matter and consciousness, and gives them the same importance, unlike science which believes only in matter, and spiritualism, which gives importance to consciousness and ignores the existence of matter." Called *Jeevan Vidya*, the philosophy provided Pandey with a framework for the kind of education he would like for India's underprivileged children. He designed a curriculum based on *Jeevan Vidya's* core beliefs: five needs of the body (food, clothing, shelter, transportation and communication) and six levels of consciousness (physical body, self, family, society, nature and the larger existence).

"What is very damaging about the present system is that it takes people away from the production economy and prepares them for the service sector," says Pandey. "We're forcing people like farmers, cloth makers or shoemakers to live a life of deprivation while people who are in service-sector jobs, which I think are non-essential, are drawing very high salaries. This discrepancy has to be corrected. Essentially we need an educational system which can strengthen the production economy so everybody has enough to fulfill their needs." The school he envisioned would promote values that form the basis for a just human order (*samajikta*), and foster self-reliance by being part of the production economy (*svavalamban*).

Pandey found a laboratory for his ideas in a primary school started by his maternal grandfather in Reoti village in the family home district of Ballia in Uttar Pradesh state. "He was happy because he needed someone who could look after the school," says Pandey, who also sought to mend fences with his father and mother. "My decision to quit IIT Kanpur was a very painful one because my parents weren't able to accept the fact that I was going to give up a very lucrative job. I thought that living with my grandparents would at least be more acceptable to them than going to a place that was totally unknown." Pandey asked the teachers to refrain from corporal punishment and to stop giving exams. He introduced vocational

training programs such as candle making and hand-made greeting cards, and reestablished links with Asha for help with improving the school's infrastructure.

The experiment lasted four years until 1997. "I had asked the teachers to stop beating the children and explained to them that they should make the process of teaching more interesting to engage the children's attention," says Pandey. But while they put the cane away, the teachers continued to teach by rote, dictating lessons and expecting students to memorize them. The students became disorderly. "There would be total chaos in the class and the teacher would just sit on his or her chair and not do anything," Pandey recalls. "When we would ask them, they would just blame it on me. They would say: 'I was instructed not to use the stick.'" Pandey tried to persuade his grandfather to change the teachers, but he refused because he needed them and their qualifications so the government would accredit the school, which served some 200 pupils.

The compromise was for Pandey to establish an alternative school beside the regular one. "It continued for a while, but we were not able to sustain it, so we closed it down," he recalls. By then, though, another school was up and running near Bhainsaha township, also in Ballia district. A landowner named Ramprasad Yadav donated land for a primary school from grades 1 to 7. With the help of Asha's Berkeley chapter, the original structures made of bamboo and hay collected by Bhainsaha residents have been replaced by more permanent infrastructure. Sewing and computer literacy classes for women have been started. "Now, we are also holding some public meetings where we invite only socially sensitive individuals," says Pandey. "We don't invite politicians or religious people, so participants can come and discuss social problems and possible solutions."

At Bhainsaha, Pandey had free rein to put the ideas of Gandhi and the philosophy of *Jeevan Vidya* into action. The school did not give examinations and punish or reward students "In most regular schools you would be testing the children in four or five subjects," he explains. "Just evaluating a child on the basis of a limited number of areas is very damaging because a child who does not do well in these subjects feels that he or she is somehow inferior to the child who is doing better. It is the teacher's duty to ensure that the children who are not doing well in the class are encouraged to do better so that everybody learns the subject." Like in his grandfather's school, students were taught useful arts and crafts.

One incident crystallized another shortcoming of traditional schools in Pandey's mind. "Once I asked [some] students to write an essay on their mother," he recounts. "They refused. They said they would write an essay on a cow or anything else. That's what I realized [about regular schools]. You would study everything but your relationships. You would be taught about rituals, but not the essence of relationships. You could not bring your personal relationships and problems to class. Whereas I think that is the most important thing, your relationships and how you live with other human beings so they can make you happy." At Bhainsaha, instead of learning that the first letter in the Hindu alphabet "a" is for "area" (a fruit), the children were taught that "a" is for "amah" (mother).

But curriculums cannot inculcate values. "Ultimately it is the interaction between human beings which propagates values," says Pandey. "Therefore the understanding of the teacher and the manner he conducts group exercises are very important." The teachers at Bhainsaha do not have formal academic qualifications, but they are fully committed to the ideals of Gandhi and *Jeevan Vidya*. In line with their beliefs, they are working toward self-reliance. "At one point, they decided they would not receive outside funds to carry on their activities," says Pandey. "They have been trying to come up with their own ways of supporting themselves. For example, three of them are doing cooperative farming." The students are supposed to pay two rupees a month, but not everybody complies and the school does not push them.

Pandey was directly involved in the Bhainsaha school for less than a year. He left Ballia in late 1997 to return to the family home in Lucknow, where his wife Arundhati Dharu and their infant son Chaitanya were living. Arundhati is a nationally known figure in the Save the Narmada Movement. They met and married in 1994. "She was based in the first village which got submerged," he recalls. "She had been there for about eight years organizing the tribals [against the project]. She was known to be a very difficult activist to deal with and the entire administration of the area, including the police, were quite terrified of facing her." It was an unorthodox marriage. After the wedding, Arundhati continued her work in the

Narmada valley in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat while Pandey went off to far-off Ballia district in Uttar Pradesh.

Two years older than her husband and from a different caste, Arundhati is a strong-willed activist who had been arrested more than 40 times. She and her associates were on a *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) when Pandey, who was still searching for a social cause to champion, came to visit. "The monsoons came and the water started rising," he remembers. "We would not leave. The police came into the village to drive us out and arrested seven of us." Arundhati was the last person to go. "She put up the most resistance. She was an important activist, so the police had to seek permission from the state government before arresting her." It was Pandey's first time in jail and there was nothing to do, so he started writing. "I knew that I was an artist, but I never knew that would write poetry." He wrote several poems, including one that praised Arundhati as a determined leader and strong fighter.

The paean impressed Arundhati. "It confirmed in her mind that I had developed a liking for her, whereas for me she was a very senior activist and a leader that I looked up to," says Pandey. When they were released from prison, Arundhati sat beside him on the overnight bus trip. "She proposed to me at 4 in the morning," Pandey recalls. "That came as a total shock to me because I just could not imagine being in a relationship with a woman who had been an activist for ten years and one who was well known nationally. And it was clear that I would not join the movement because I had some ideological problems with its approach." Inspired by Gandhi, he was also a celibate. "I was not going to marry and I could never imagine myself in a relationship which would become a sexual relationship prior to marriage," says Pandey.

It took him two days to decide that he and Arundhati could make a go of it. The original arrangement was for the couple to wait a year to see whether they should marry. But Pandey did not reckon with his parents, who were so desperate for their son to marry that they told him he could wed someone from the Muslim community or even a Dalit (untouchable). Upon learning of their son's engagement, they immediately phoned Arundhati's parents and arranged everything. "Within four months, we were married," laughs Pandey. Arundhati stayed on with the Save the Narmada Movement, but left the valley to live with her in-laws in her third month of pregnancy in 1996. She was not prepared to go to Ballia and its feudal rural social structure.

Back in Lucknow, Pandey started looking for a site for a resource center or *ashram*. He wanted to build not only a school for the children of the poor, but also a retreat for workshops, seminars and discussions about Jeevan Vidya and other issues. But Pandey got sidetracked in May 1998 when India exploded its first nuclear warhead. "What was very shocking to me and my wife Arundhati was the celebration which the middle and upper-middle classes, including the media, were indulging in," he recounts. "I was shocked to see ordinary people, like my mother who was very religious, approve of these tests. This was acceptance of violence, something we could not imagine ten years back." He ascribes the frenzy to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism after the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. "The Hindu fundamentalist groups were able to whip up Hindu sentiments and were essentially able to get the approval of middle class and upper middle class Hindus."

The couple wanted to do something about Hindu chauvinism, which threatened to upset communal harmony within India and spark a military confrontation with Pakistan. In a meeting they organized, some 50 communists, socialists, Gandhi followers and other disciples of non-violence decided to hold a peace protest. A crowd of 500 people showed solidarity with the anti-nuclear campaign on August 6, 1998 in Lucknow, one of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's constituencies. "But then it dawned on us that the people who came were already convinced," says Pandey. "We needed to talk to the common people who had bought the government's arguments." He proposed holding a Global Peace March from Pokaran, near the site of the nuclear test, to Sarnath, the place where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, 1,500 kilometers away.

The plan was to start on May 11, 1999, the first anniversary of the nuclear test, and end on August 6, which coincidentally was the day Japan would commemorate the dropping of the first atomic bomb by the U.S. on Hiroshima in 1945. The demonstrators would stop in villages and towns on the route to talk about the dangers of going nuclear and hopefully get the attention of the media and gain a national platform for their

cause. “We had to plan the stopovers, who would organize the meetings for us, who would put us up,” Pandey recalls. It took the group some five months to iron out the complicated logistics of the march. Pandey and other leaders also attended an intensive course on the scientific underpinnings of atomic weapons and nuclear power plants. It was conducted by anti-nuclear activist Surendra Gadejar, who has a Ph.D in physics from IIT Kanpur, and his wife Sanghamitra Gadekar, the physician daughter of Narayan Desai, a committed Gandhian whose father was Gandhi’s secretary.

When the actual march started, however, only Pandey and two other activists had committed to walk all the way to Sarnath. But they had the support of many organizations and prominent personalities, including novelist Arundhati Roy, legislator Kuldip Nayyar, former Navy chief Admiral L. Ramdas and Save the Narmada leader Medha Patkar. And people in the towns near the test site were enthusiastic. At Khetolai, just three kilometers from the test site, many residents belonged to the Bishnoy community, which is known for its sensitivity to the environment. “They were not very happy with the test because of the violence associated with nuclear weapons,” says Pandey. Some 80 people attended the inaugural ceremony at Khetolai. About half of them marched on to Pokaran 25 kilometers away.

In Pokaran, the Global Peace March participants were met by more than 100 rightist activists from the ruling BJP party and its Hindu fundamentalist allies, the RSS and Shiv Sena. “They had placards and were shouting slogans and abusing us,” says Pandey. The rightists accused them of being American agents and supporters of the opposition Congress Party, which was led by Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of slain prime minister Rajiv Gandhi (no relation to Mohandas Gandhi). Fresh elections had been called after a no-confidence motion was passed against the Vajpayee government. “The police had to push the right-wing activists for about half a kilometer backwards so we could proceed,” recalls Pandey. The marchers decided not to hold a meeting in Pokara on police advice.

Things turned uglier in Ramdeora, the third stop. The district magistrate tried to convince them to bypass the town or at least not to hold a meeting there. “These are rowdy people,” she said of the rightist protesters. “They can only be dealt with in only one way. We have to have to use force against them.” The peace marchers did not want to cancel a second time. But at the evening meeting, the right wingers came in force and drowned out the anti-nuclear lecture with their chanting and exploding firecrackers. None of the locals were able to penetrate the ring of protesters. “We were speaking to ourselves, a group of 20 at that time,” says Pandey. “Some of us were speakers and the remaining ones sat in the audience.” On their way to their lodgings, the marchers were pelted with stones, hurting one of their number.

It was too much for Pandey. He went on a fast, vowing to end it only when the people who had thrown stones listened to the group’s message. But in order not to disrupt the march, he agreed to travel in the jeep that was carrying everyone’s luggage. A rightist mob also met them in Phalodi, the fourth stop. But they disappeared after that. “The BJP at the national level decided to withdraw the protests,” Pandey explains. “They had realized that we were not going to stop, they had verified our bona fides and they also realized that [the protests] were giving us too much attention.” He stopped the fast and resumed marching with the group, whose numbers averaged 15 to 20 at any one time. They would start walking at dawn and stop around 10 a.m. to take a bath and rest, and then spend the afternoon mobilizing an audience for the evening lecture.

India and Pakistan started a brief war in the Kargil mountains during the march and some organizations withdrew their backing. “We were questioned whether we should [continue with] this march because the country was facing a crisis and [everyone] should be standing behind our prime minister and support him in his initiative against Pakistan,” says Pandey. “We said that the war was caused by the nuclear weapons testing and therefore we needed to talk about it. As my friend Rampravesh Shashatri said, ‘After all, you go with the water when there’s fire.’ Peace becomes more relevant in the time of war.” Admiral Ramdas also belittled the value of nuclear weapons in a conventional war like that in Kargil, calling them “a weapon of no military value.” Boosted by the nation’s patriotic fervor, Vajpayee was returned to the premiership. Pakistan eventually blinked and an all-out war was averted.

When the Global Peace March ended in Sarnath after three months, the marchers had collected 18,000 signatures from people who also showed their support by paying at least one rupee each. Pandey concedes

that there was no huge outpouring of support for the march. But they succeeded in changing some minds. “At every place, the meeting would usually begin with the same superficial understanding which was prevalent in society, that the weapon had done good for India’s pride and we were more secure,” he recalls. “But then we would into explanations and show slides of the victims of radiation [from nuclear power plants] in Rajasthan and the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” In the end, everyone would agree that nuclear weapons were evil and should be stopped.

The Global Peace March gave Pandey a high profile in India and abroad. He was invited to join the newly formed Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace, a national organization started by senior journalists Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, and the National Alliance of People’s Movements spearheaded by Medha Patkar. He also got plugged into the global peace movement. “I never thought that I would ever leave India again because I had decided to work at the grassroots level,” he says. “But this march has now taken me out of the country a number of times. I went to Sweden in 2000 to attend the Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones Conference. Then I became part of an India-Pakistan delegation to neighboring countries [tasked with campaigning for] a nuclear weapons-free South Asia.”

But Pandey has not forgotten his original mission. After the 1999 march, he finally found a site for an *ashram*. He was offered a piece of land in the district of Lalpur, about 60 kilometers from Lucknow. “I immediately liked the place because it was in a Dalit village,” says Pandey. He wanted to help break down the discrimination against this marginalized community, which accounts for the overwhelming number of India’s poor. Dalits do not belong to any of India’s four castes and are ostracized as a result, especially in the rural areas where the caste system remains strong. They live in their own villages, are forbidden direct access to public wells, must use special tumblers when drinking tea in public places and cannot fraternize with caste Hindus.

The *ashram* was built and operated with part of a US\$30,000 fund that Asha raised in the U.S. in 1998, when Pandey’s friend DP Prakash appealed to the Indian community to donate an hour of their salary on August 15, India’s Independence Day. The heart of the ashram is a big open platform with a roof of bamboo and hay. “This is the center of our activities,” says Pandey. “This is where the children study and where meetings are held.” Pictures of social reformers are painted on the pillars – Gandhi, Buddha, Sai Baba, Rabindranath Tagore, Jayaprakash Narayan. “I was against forming an institution with boundary walls because I wanted to have live contact with the people I was going to work with,” Pandey says of the center’s open architecture.

The *ashram* has become part of the 60-household Dalit village. “We are more friendly than the government primary health care center,” says Pandey. Villagers can ask for free herbal medicines 24 hours a day, thanks to donations from the Ellen Homeo and Herbal Products Ltd. A doctor from Lucknow comes on the third Sunday of every month. The *ashram* established livelihood projects such as bee keeping and screen-printing. “We also take up activities according to the season,” says Pandey. The *ashram* has produced wheat cereals and potato chips. The products are marketed through informal networks of family and friends, with the Asha chapters selling greeting cards on handmade paper in the U.S. A village fund has been set up for residents to borrow emergency cash, so they would not need to resort to local moneylenders and their usurious rates.

From the first, the *ashram* treated the Dalits as equals. The newcomers would eat in their homes, which is a big no-no for Brahmins like Pandey. The *ashram* was breaching so many taboos that the Lucknow-based Brahmin doctor who donated the property asked for the land back. “His brothers were angry at the way we were operating,” says Pandey. “The upper caste people did not like the fact that we were making the Dalits sit on the same level as we were sitting and [letting them] take decisions. We were eating in their homes and they were able to enter our kitchen.” In the end, the doctor let the donation stand in part because the villagers refused to let the *ashram* go. “He told everybody that we were Christians who have polluted their households by eating there,” says Pandey. “So they told him that he should come eat at their homes to purify them, which of course he would never do.” If you take back your land, the Dalits added, we would give them our own land instead.

These days Pandey cannot spend as much time in the *ashram* as he wants to. He and his family were originally supposed to live there, but Arundhati, who has given birth to their second child, has decided to stay in Lucknow. "My heart is there [in Lalpur]," says Pandey. "If given the choice, I would go and live in a village and carry out my activities there. But it is increasingly more difficult because of my background, my being able to speak English as well as Hindi. A number of people at the national level prefer that I come to the meetings because [many] are in English." He also needs to be in Lucknow to keep in touch with the various Asha chapters through the Internet. "We select and monitor projects for them," Pandey explains. In keeping with Asha's practice of negligible overheads so all the funds raised go to beneficiaries, he has not set up an office or administrative staff for this work. Pandey and his associates do the all the banking and field work themselves.

Then there are his obligations to the peace movement. Pandey organized another peace march in 2002, this time to educate people about the dangers of communalism. It was a response to the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat state, which he thinks was fanned by politicians while the authorities stood by passively. Another priority is the rift with Pakistan over the disputed territory of Kashmir. "My next big plan is to take out a peace march from India to Pakistan through Kashmir," says Pandey. "We believe there are a number of people on both sides who want the violence to end. In 2001, the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy invited ten students and three teachers from Islamabad to Lucknow. "The response of the common people was so overwhelming," Pandey recounts. "People on the street would come and thrust pieces of paper in the hands of the Pakistani girls, saying 'Here's my address, please write to us.'" One of the students later wrote an article that began: "Nowhere in the world can you enter an enemy country and be instantly comfortable."

The bottom line for Pandey is non-violence. "Arms don't bring security," he says passionately. "Security is a relationship of trust." That applies as well to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. He has called the U.S. the biggest terrorist state for its militarist response in Afghanistan. "Obviously we condemn all acts of terrorism because they are acts which kill people," says Pandey. "But we cannot justify the U.S. actions because, first of all, they are mostly unilaterally taken. The Afghanistan problem is its own creation. It was the U.S. which in the first place supported these terrorists by providing them with arms and money. The solution to the problem of terrorism should be political in nature because it is a political problem. Most of the time, when you push people to a corner, they take up arms."

He holds up Punjab state in India as an example of what can be done. "People took arms an one point in time and their life had become so miserable there," says Pandey. "But ultimately, when the political parties in Punjab were convinced to come back to the mainstream political process, the situation became normal." When VP Singh was prime minister of India from 1989 to 1991, he used to say: "We have to establish more industries in Kashmir to provide jobs for the people." That was his solution to the problem, says Pandey. "Nobody understood at that time, but I think he was talking sense." His own work with the poor communities of India can be seen in this context. By giving people the means to live a dignified life and helping their children blossom in their full humanity, Pandey is forestalling the violence and terrorism that desperation can engender.

At 37, he has decades ahead of him to continue making a difference. But Pandey knows there is only so much one individual can do. "I think my most important job is to encourage people from the grassroots to become activists," he says. "I have consciously been putting them in positions of leadership. I would like to see my role reduced to a supplementary one." His immediate goal is to make Lalpur a self-reliant village in terms of education and health care, in the resolution of disputes without going to the police and the courts, "in all ways so that it doesn't have to depend on politicians, government officials and outside agencies, including myself."

Imagine what can be achieved if a critical mass of hotbeds of terrorism can be similarly transformed. "I'm very optimistic," says Pandey. "And the reason I have so much hope in peace and the creation of a just human society transcending all borders of caste, religion and nationhood is because human beings like to be in a state of happiness. That is a more stable state of equilibrium. Nobody likes to be in a state where they are uncomfortable, where they have to live in a situation of violence and poverty. I think it's our destiny to move in the right direction." And this is one young man who is determined to help that process along.

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