

The Visual Metaphor of Dissent

And you thought design was the preoccupation of the elite? Ask the Dass brothers.

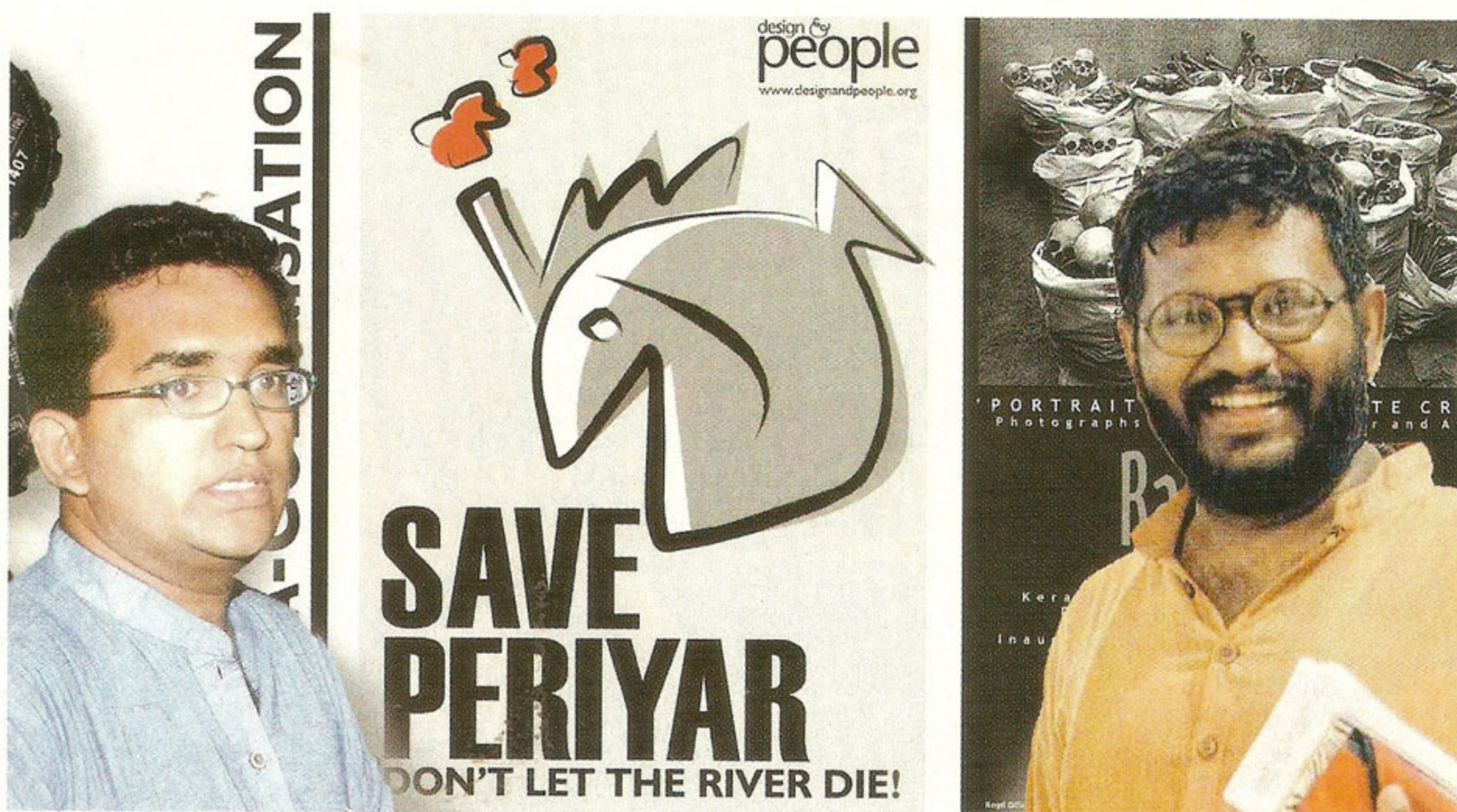
BY HARSH KABRA

CLOISTERED in their ivory towers, designers often grow insular to the concerns of the masses. Sethu and Suku Dass, sons of Kerala's noted political cartoonist Yesudasan, were irked by design buckling under its own dead weight of elitism and big money. They believe creativity can make its own contribution to the lives of the ordinary people. Drawing upon their long voluntary stint with non-profit organisations and movements, the brothers were keen to bring design out from the circle of the affluent into the realm of the deprived.

Born of this urge in '03 was Design & People (D&P), a non-profit organisation of over 40 graphic, industrial and architectural designers, who work voluntarily for individuals and organisations—mostly for free—to identify the design needs of people disadvantaged by war, disability, political and environmental conditions and improve their lives by catalysing design theories, practices and solutions.

"Design doesn't exist in the better part of India," explains Sethu. "Our aim is to turn designers into activists, get them out of their air-conditioned cabins, take design to the people on the road and change the way they perceive designers." That Sethu, 36, is armed with a fine arts degree, while Suku, 33, is a qualified architect has certainly helped them in their crusade. But the real driving force is their conviction.

As a student, Sethu had bowed out of the Industrial Design Centre at IIT Mumbai when he couldn't reconcile with peers whose sole ambition was to make money. Later, moved by the plight of the Tibetans, he founded the Friends of Tibet—India (FoT) in '99 and has since presided over its growth. Suku has been no less passionate. A keen artist and a practising architect, he has successfully bal-



Suku (left) and Setu whose commitment has mobilised many to work for the commoners

anced his exacting job with the responsibilities at D&P and FoT.

For many, D&P spells an unconventional concept. "People aren't comfortable with the idea of free design," Sethu says with a smile. "They doubt anything that is available for free." Yet, there's no dearth of organisations—stretched either for funds or know-how—approaching D&P with varied requirements ranging from the design of websites, logos, stationery, badges, posters, brochures, banners, bookmarks, T-shirts, books, reports and campaigns to buildings and campuses.

Some of D&P's beneficiaries include Pratyasha Cancer Children's Welfare Society, a trust named Enlightenment and Development of Vulnerable and Outraged Rural Masses, FoT, Greenpeace India, and Buddha Smiles Education Movement (whose alternative primary school project for the underprivileged in Vellore district is being supported by D&P through voluntary architectural services). D&P hosts and maintains the websites of organisations like Food Safety Solutions International

or Society First, helping them to reach out to people.

While D&P contributed to the likes of Plachimada's anti-cola and Kochi's 'Save Periyar' campaigns, it spearheaded some of its own, promoting neem plantation and condemning plastic. Such is the commitment of the brothers to their cause that they walked out of a project on discovering that it was part-aided by an MNC they'd castigated for its ecological wrongdoings.

D&P also holds film and documentary screenings, discussions and citizen get-togethers for various causes. "When foreign designers visiting India contact us, we invite them to hold public workshops on alternative technologies," reveals Sethu, citing those held recently by Canadian architect Elke Cole and German designer Sandy Kaltenborn.

D&P designs, manufactures and markets eco-friendly scribble pads, braided cane chairs, audio-visual CDs of expert lectures and a collection of topical writings named *Creative Resistance* to generate funds for various organisations as well as for itself. With initiatives like relief concerts and rebuilding plans for tsunami-stricken villages, D&P seems increasingly keen on a larger role for itself. Contact D&P at: M-10/31, Changampuzha Nagar, Kochi—682033. Tel: 9388465953/9847044248 Website: <http://www.designandpeople.org> ■

They try to identify the design needs of people disadvantaged by war, disability, political and environmental conditions. "But people aren't comfortable with the idea of free design."