

**Asha For Education,
23608, NE 45th Place,
Redmond, WA 98053**

Asha Kiran

Asha Seattle organizes talks by several accomplished activists and people working on development issues in India. These are organized with the goals of educating ourselves and also raising awareness in the community here on different social and development issues faced by people working at the grass-roots in India. Since most of the talks are arranged at short notice to accommodate the travel schedule of our guests we invite you to be part of our email invitation list. Please send email to asha-seattle-info@yahoogroups.com if you would like to receive such invitations.

Our last guest, an accomplished activist and expert on traditional water systems—Rajendra Singh is one of the founders of Tarun Bharat Sangh. The work of Tarun Bharat Sangh in Alwar district in Rajasthan has actually re-greened large portions of dry desert land through simple rain water collection systems. The group was awarded the Magsaysay award for their work. Below are excerpts of their work and highlights of Rajendra Singh's talk. Please contact us if you would like any further details this.

PUTTING TRADITION BACK INTO PRACTICE

The semi-arid landscape of Alwar in Rajasthan has undergone a major transformation in the past decade. Although rainfall averages a scanty 620mm per year, several wells in the area have been recharged to capacity. Hand-pumps are back to life and water gushes out of them in one stroke. Several seasonal rivers have turned into perennial water sources. Water has seeped back into the parched map of the northwest Indian desert. The miracle of re-greening has been achieved through the tradition of *Johads* which were originally used by the people of Alwar. Over the years the tradition was slowly lost due to large industrial processes in the area including mining. Johads are simple earthen rain water harvesting structures that prevent water run-off. They have to be carefully built and maintained by the community to collect and use rain-water. 2500 Johads have been built in Alwar and adjoining districts in 500 villages.

The work began in 1984 when Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), an organization based in village Bhikampura of Alwar district. TBS started their work in economically impoverished villages of Alwar. A terrible drought in 1885-86 saw vast migration from the villages due to acute water shortage. Water sources had dried out. The neighboring mountains were severely eroded of any vegetation due to quartz and marble mining. The government of Rajasthan had declared these areas as *dark zones*. TBS began their work in these dark zone communities paying attention to their most desperate need for water. Under the guidance of village elders they decided to revive the traditional Johad water systems. Their task was to engage in mobilizing the village communities to do this. This task was no less than rebuilding a forgotten village institution that had nurtured the Johads in the past. The communities planned the location of the Johad, contributed money for their creation and continued to take care of long term maintenance. They carefully managed the water resources by planting vegetation that has adapted to arid desert land (with low water requirements). Success in one village inspired another to follow suit and soon the Johad culture in the region was revived. In conjunction re-forestation with appropriate plants gradually succeeded in re-greening the area. Gradually the water began to flow again in dried up seasonal water sources.

As water began to flow again—it impacted everything. Migrant population returned home. Carefully planned agriculture revived work in the village. The women and girls could fetch water more easily and hence had extra time to pursue micro entrepreneurship and education. Johads are not just water bodies but also cultural bonds for the villages. A Johad is worshipped as a sacred place on many auspicious occasions such as child-birth, weddings and cremation. Reviving the Johads has contributed to reviving the socio-cultural traditions of Alwar.

Marketing water resources:

Rajendra Singh drew our attention to the current proposal to marketize water resources in India. Under this proposal water - a shared resource today can become the property of private enterprises. This will have serious adverse effect, especially on the people of lower economic sections. Low income people cannot afford to buy water. They rely on natural community based water resources. If they are put in a position of having to buy water—this will become a matter of life and death for them. Strong coalitions of groups with leaders like Rajendra Singh have started reviewing the water policy carefully so that people's perspectives are taken into account.

Rajendra believes that a good water management system has to be a community based decentralized system. This will ensure reliability. Simple community based harvesting structures can work wonders as they have proven in Rajasthan. His dream is to ensure that every Indian has access to water. He believes in strong self-reliant communities in which people work together with understanding. He would like to raise awareness in every state on the benefits of local water management. Lastly, he wants to continue to roll up his sleeves and help build the next Johad!

Campaign for communal harmony.

During these times of communal tension in India many volunteers of Asha have come forward to spread a message of peace. Communal harmony is an important aspect of every society. It is important for all peace loving people and organizations to come forward and promote secular values. Efforts are being made in India as well as in the US.

Several volunteers of Asha in India in conjunction with groups in Uttar Pradesh participated in raising awareness for communal harmony. A majority of Asha volunteers live in Uttar Pradesh and close to Ayodhya. The entire area was tense because of the communal rioting that happened earlier in Gujarat and the proposal to rebuild a temple in Ayodhya. Volunteers in India participated in a peace walk from Lucknow to Ayodhya. Some volunteers fasted to raise public awareness on the importance of this issue. Signatures were collected from people on the streets in an effort to make people come together for this purpose. The response from people on the streets was tremendous! 1100 signatures were collected in a couple of days. Many people joined the peace walk en-route to Ayodhya. Chapters of Asha in the US participated in various efforts along with sister organizations. Peace rally and relay fasts at Gandhi Statue in front of Embassy of India, Washington, DC were organized by a spontaneous coalition of concerned citizens and groups. The Dallas chapter of Asha, along with AID and CRY Dallas organized a Candle Light Vigil, as a call for Peace and Harmony, and to condemn the indifference of the Government in controlling the violence. Volunteers from the Seattle chapter initiated the signature campaign idea held in Lucknow and contributed towards the creation of flyers for peace. Volunteers from a few chapters participated in a radio show presented by www.desimasalaonline.com and hosted by Mike Ghouse (mikeghouse@aol.com) Many people called in and echoed thoughts of peace and harmony. Some comments were: "We should stop thinking about Hindus and Muslims and just talk about Indians..." "If a Hindu stabbed a Muslim or a Muslim stabbed a Hindu, the blood that spilled from either one was the same... red" "Revenge and Hatred are never valid methods of solving a problem". "99.99% of India is in favor of peace and harmony. The other 1/10th of 1% are the criminals causing trouble" People wanted the Government to enforce strict rules to ensure Law and Order for all its citizens and to take utmost measures to prevent murder of innocent people. The show concluded by Mike summarizing that humanity suffered in this massacre, and that this violence should be very strictly dealt with.

Bengal Visits Update — Swati Sircar

This is a note on my visit to several partner groups in Bengal, in Sept, 2001. I visited four rural and three urban based projects groups working in different areas.

The first visit was to see the work of **Uthnau** in Birbhum. **Uthnau** works with the Santhals (adibasis - indigenous people) in some very remote & isolated villages. Their work is towards the upliftment of Santhals and sustainable development of the region. Uthnau has also been trying to free many of the Santhals from oppressive work conditions in stone quarries. The Silicon Valley chapter of Asha is currently working with this group. This was my very first visit ever, so it was very exciting & full of adventures like crossing an over-flowing river in a jeep at night or riding a 2-wheeler through the highways & very rough uneven village roads after monsoon!

The next visit was to **Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha** (BTS) in Sunderbans and a village called **Khatra** in Bankura. **BTS** is also very remote in terms of reaching there. We were on a motorboat for 2.5 hours on either way to the island Kultali. This group is working on all round development of the area. It was interesting to see how they had cut off part of a river & converted this to a sweet water lake. They now use the water for agriculture. It was also nice to see solar powered lights at every cross street. The Seattle and Berkeley chapters of Asha fund the school run by BTS.

My next visit was to **Champa mahila Society** (CMS) - another group based in the Sunderbans. This has been Asha Seattle's longest partnership. We started working with the group in 1994 and still work together

at various levels involving non-formal schooling, orphanage support, and repair and running costs for the nearby government school and other mini-projects. In many ways this was the most rewarding visit of all since I learnt about the overall aspects of their work. I learnt & saw a lot out of which women's empowerment through self-help-groups (SHG) was most noteworthy!

The next set of my visits was to more urban based efforts. In Kolkata I visited two groups near my home – one working with mentally challenged & hearing impaired children. The second **Tomorrow's Foundation**, taking care of children from the red light area, slums & pavements of Kalighat. Tomorrow's Foundation has been working on a project called **Street to School**, which is being funded by the **LA** chapter. The final visit was to **Hriday Akash** also working with slum children in one part of east Kolkata. The Houston chapter is reviewing their proposal.

As you see, two of the visits, Uthnau & Khatra, were in adibasi areas, two more were located in Sunderbans & two worked with urban slum children. It was very helpful because visiting different groups that face similar challenges gave me deeper insight which might not have come out of any single one. For example the unique problem the Sunderbans face came up neatly as follows: Sunderbans is a mono crop area. So to supplement their income which is not enough from the single crop people go to forest (for wood, honey, wax) or river (for fish, crab). Then they get attacked by tigers in forest or crocodile & sharks in the river. We also heard incidents of river bank caving in on people. There are a large number of orphans & semi-orphans in that region. I also got a sense of how remote few villages are from any basic medical facilities. Where snakebite is pretty common it may take up to 3 hrs before the victim gets any medical attention!

In Khatra, I met a young adibasi lady, who used to write in a newspaper (reporting adibasi news only). She told us many things about the adibasi society – why is that even though some people get educated, they just leave the adibasi way & hence does not help in the development of adibasis themselves. She also described gender relationships in the adibasi society.

Another observation I have is that whenever the teachers have some training that reflects very positively on the students. This was very prominent in the three urban projects. The kids in Street to School were fabulous in terms of their enthusiasm, forwardness, eagerness to come up to the board. In the center for the disabled children also, the slightly older kids with hearing problems had no problem understanding us & expressed them very clearly. On the other hand in Hriday Akash I felt if the teachers get some training then the students will benefit a lot. Unfortunately they are running without any funding from anywhere & the teachers are some graduate youth (some unemployed) who just devote their time & energy towards this good cause. But once it came to performance, especially drama, the kids excelled. This is because the project is run by the Indian Mime Theater.

Also in CMS, kids at the government school as well as at the several non-formal education centers were very smart & bright. It was clear they are learning, not just mugging. In fact, when asked "who gives us milk?" they came up with all possible cattle, goat etc & one surprised us with "mother".

It was fascinating to find all kids very smart & bright regardless of where they are from. It was also interesting to note that the only difference between the rural & the urban kids was fluency in English. The kids at Street to School were as comfortable with English rhymes as the CMS kids were with Bengali ones.

It also became quite clear to me that to do a really good work you have to team up. You cannot just go alone to a village and start every thing single handedly. I met some people who were never comfortable with others (& always remembered the negative side of anybody) & tried doing things alone. They ended up doing nothing or very little. On the other hand in when people teamed up they achieved a lot. There is absolutely no substitution for working together as a team.

In addition, I saw the snowballing effect success has. As soon as people see good things actually happening at a near by village they come forward to implement similar things in their neighborhoods as well. That is how any good developmental work, awareness, mass-mobilization works best, when the target people come forward.

Please contact asha-seattle-info@yahoogroups.com for full reports. Also visit the following websites:

http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/proj/BTS/site_visit.htm

<http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/proj/cms/CMSsitevisit.htm>

<http://www.ashanet.org/la/Projects/Calcutta/siteVisit2001.doc>

This series of site visit brought me in contact with a lot of NGO's, groups & people working in the development area. It was great to get to know the real people (in various projects) who have been familiar

names for a long time. Most rewarding was talking to them, listening to their experiences, how the groups grew, the ups & downs they faced and making new friends that way – not to mention the warm welcomes, the cultural programs, site seeing & the great food!

Those of you, who have trouble balancing precious time between family & Asha site visits during a trip to India, can try my idea of taking parents (or family members) to site visits. It serves two purposes: a break & change for them along with visiting places they probably never will otherwise. They will get a better understanding of what you do & why there is a need for this – basically you as part of Asha-family . A note of caution: the projects tend to sponsor your travel fare. It'll be good if we make it a point to say no to this . Also sometimes they have to rent jeep/auto or something else to show us some remote place. I think it will be good to reimburse these costs so our groups don't incur them.

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT....

Asha Seattle works with over thirty different communities in India on a recurring basis. We maintain very close contact with our project partners in India. **Our annual commitments are in the range of \$300,000.0.** We are looking for your continued support to help us meet our yearly goals. Like most non-profits we are also affected by recent events and the economic downturn. We would like you to come forward and join us in continuing to support good effective work which affects the lives in so many underprivileged communities.

We would like to encourage our donors to come forward and adopt the expenses of specific schools or projects. Our goal is to build a donor base for every effort we support. This way, you can be sure of how your donation is utilized and our partners in India benefit tremendously from uninterrupted support. Please do contact us via email or telephone if you would like to participate in our school adoption program. We need and strongly encourage your involvement.

Some sample projects requiring support are listed below -

- ? **Digantar** a school providing high quality education to children from extremely poor and minority backgrounds in Rajasthan. They have a high girl child enrollment. Digantar has been innovative in their teaching and learning methods and are widely respected in India for their contribution to education. They provide extensive teachers training and circulate a pedagogical magazine called “Vimarsh” in India. **Requirements: \$40,000.**
- ? **Avehi Abacus** has been developing on an extensive program to introduce a much needed subject on environment, health care, gender issues and a child’s future role within their community. It is trying to reach 14,000 children this year in Mumbai’s municipal schools attended by some of the poorest children. Their innovative curriculum can be utilized by any schools in India. They need our support to make it happen. **Requirements: \$60,000.**

We can provide information on many more groups requiring support. If you are keen on addressing a specific geographical region of India we would be happy to work with you.

ASHA CONTRIBUTION SLIP

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Please make your checks payable to Asha For Education.
You can mail your contribution to
Asha For Education (Seattle Chapter),
23608, NE 45th Place,
Redmond, WA 98053
100% of your contributions go towards Asha's projects in India.
Your contributions are tax deductible.

Suggestions? _____

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Would you like to volunteer with us? Join us at our monthly meetings in the Lake Washington School District Administration Building near the Redmond Town Center. Our meeting dates and venue can be located on our website <http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/min/meetings.html>. Our meetings are open to everyone. Please do try and come.
Email: asha-seattle-info@yahoogroups.com
Internet: <http://www.ashanet.org/seattle>

Change of address?

Do write to us or send us email (address above) and save us some postage! It will help keep our costs low.

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