


 ashā kiran


 Asha begins
work with
Sambhavna
by Jayashree Janardhan

Asha has recently started working with Sambhavna - a trust with the sole objective of improving the health condition of the survivors of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster. We have begun by supporting the publication of a women's (and girls) health education booklet to help with the menstrual problems faced by women in the area of the Bhopal Gas disaster. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy is a catastrophe that has few parallels in industrial history. Close to midnight on Dec 2, 1984 a poisonous grey cloud leaked from the Union Carbide C plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. The total number of deaths exceeded 12,000 within a few days. Recent estimates indicate that there are currently 120, 000 to 150, 000 persons with chronic problems due to the gas exposure. Next generations are being affected even today. The people of Bhopal were let down both by the corporation Union Carbide (now Dow) and the local and Indian governments - many have received little or no compensation for the traumatic and chronic health problems, loss of employment and ongoing medical and related costs. Several websites describe the Gas disaster and continued problems. Please see and for more details.

The Sambhavna Trust provides medical care, health education, and research and monitoring facilities to the survivors free of charge. The clinic which opened on September 1, 1996 has treated over 12384 people to date, mostly from the severely affected communities. The clinic provides

appropriate medical care through modern medicine as well as Ayurveda, Yoga and other traditional therapies. It also plays an active role in health education and helping the victims manage their own chronic health problems.

Background of the Health problems faced by the survivors

It is estimated that currently 120,000 to 150,000 people in Bhopal suffer from debilitating chronic illnesses resulting from gas-exposure. The majority of these people suffer from respiratory illnesses such as fibrosis, bronchial asthma, Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease, emphysema and recurrent chest infections. In addition, because the gas-affected lungs are more susceptible to infection, pulmonary tuberculosis among the exposed population is significantly higher than the national average. Other prominent health problems attributed to the gas are damage to the cornea of the eye, reproductive problems, post-traumatic stress syndrome and neurological problems. Studies in reproductive problems have shown an increase in menstrual cycle disruption, leucorrhea (white discharge), dysmenorrhea (pain with menstruation), pregnancy loss and infant mortality. Studies on psychological effects of the disaster report high rates of anxiety, restlessness, grief, sleep disturbances and generalized weakness and fatigue. Studies on neurological damage have shown tingling, numbness, a sensation of pins and needles in the extremities and muscle aches.

Women's health

The Sambhavna Clinic soon started specialized gynecological care for the women and girls who had survived the gas. The Sambhavna Gynecology Clinic was

established to provide safe, simple, effective and inexpensive care. It also runs women's health education programs in the affected communities and monitors the alarming rise in cervical cancer over recent years. This portion of the clinic was inaugurated in Jan 2001.

The problems faced by the women are not often openly discussed because of social taboos. Community health worker Aziza explains, "Women do talk about it more now but are often confined to their houses and can't talk to their husbands about their problems or get education." Worryingly, Sambhavna's pathologists have found a high proportion of abnormal PAP smears among women survivors, increasing fears for a connection between cervical cancer and gas exposure. In response to this situation Sambhavna has initiated a cervical screening project. The project involves educational work in gas-affected communities to help surmount taboos concerning gynecological health; a thorough program of PAP smears coupled with smear analysis and other diagnosis and treatment. At each stage of the project the role of the community health worker is crucial to guiding the women past social obstacles. And Sambhavna's screening project shows that there is a place for the latest technology as well as 3,000 year old therapy when seeking the most rational treatment for gas survivors.

Working over the years Sambhavna has researched and come up with sufficient information on the women's health problems and how they can be treated using a combination of treatment styles. The clinic's goal is to now help the women understand and treat whatever is possible themselves. The health education booklet will help both to raise awareness and also help women become independent in terms of treatment of chronic problems.

A few Asha volunteers are training for the Seattle marathon/half marathon in November. We hope to make this a big fund-raiser for our chapter. To make that happen we need more volunteers who are willing to take part in the event and raise money for Asha. There are several events to participate in : half marathon run and walk, full marathon run and walk and even a kids marathon. This will be a great opportunity to participate in a big race event, raise money for Asha and have tons of fun.


 RUN for ashā

Please contact Amit at
amit198@comcast.net for more details
about training and the event.

Yet another new project of Asha Seattle makes a large initiative to bring educational, informative and entertaining material in local language braille to poor visually impaired children who have virtually no access to such materials.

The Project envisages establishment of a Unit for the production and circulation of a Multilingual Braille Magazine in the Indian languages at Vidya Vrikshah (a Chennai-based non-governmental organization).

The project involves:

- composing electronic versions of school text book lessons and magazine articles in the local languages on the computer system.
- using the software facilities to produce braille and cassette tape versions.
- use of free postage facilities to circulate them to visually impaired students in training institutions for the Visually impaired in the country, and through these institutions, to visually impaired persons in the areas where they are located.

A modest initial production target of 200 copies of the proposed braille magazine is projected. It will be brought out as a monthly issue. Each issue would comprise of about two school text book lessons, and two informative or entertaining magazine features. This will reach 200 locations, with a circulation of at least five visually impaired students and others at each location, making for a reach of 1000 such visually impaired children. It is hoped to replicate the Project to reach out increasingly to such persons whose number in run into millions.

The Multilingual software package of Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai would be used as the software base for production of the braille and audiotape versions of the magazine. This remarkable Software Package has been designed and developed by the IIT Chennai, as a National solution to bring literacy, education, training and employable skills for the benefit of all, especially the socially and physically disadvantaged, through the use of Information Technology. At the heart of the package is a multilingual editor which enables anyone, literate or illiterate, able or disabled, to quickly and easily learn to use computers in the Indian languages (as also English).

The entire Software suite is offered free of cost by the IIT Chennai and can be downloaded (except for the sound enabled version of the Editor due to its large size) from their website <http://acharya.iitm.ac.in>. The package rests on a high level of technical and linguistic sophistication in design, making it a unique, solution in the country or abroad.

Organization Description

Vidya Vrikshah is a Chennai-based non-governmental organization, registered as a public charitable trust. Its objectives are to harness the potential of voluntary community service together with the power of Information Technology in the service of socioeconomic development objectives.

In pursuing these objectives, it is guided by a sharp focus : (a) On methodologies that address the primary needs of the common people, viz. literacy, education, health, disability-training and employment-related skills.

(b) On IT-based solutions that they can use in their mother tongue; and

(c) On solutions that come to them at low or no cost.

Over the last five years Vidya Vrikshah's volunteer force has grown to over 150 and the following are some the results of their activities conducted under the aegis of its Centre for Disability Research,

Development and Training :

(a) Around 250 persons from all over the country, including large numbers of visually impaired persons and instructors and teachers from both regular and special schools and training institutions have been give both the IIT software and training in its use, free of charge.

(b) Development and implementation of a wide range of hardware and software based projects and packages for Literacy, Education, Health, Disability-training and Employment-related skills, details of which can be seen in their website at www.vidyavrikshah.org

One of the Vidya Vrikshah's projects of far-reaching significance is Project Vikas. This Project involves the establishment of a network of Vikas Training Centres to promote Village Development on the integrated approach described above, by providing computers, relevant software modules and training in their use to teachers, health workers and welfare workers in Schools and a Self-Help Groups in each of village. Three NGOs – Relief Foundation, Mentors, and Vidya Vrikshah have come together to implement this Project in an organized way. Vikas Training Centres have already been set up in the last six months in 21 locations (as of 01-10-2003) in Chennai, and Kanchipuram, Tiruvallur and Vellore Districts, and more centres are in the pipeline. It is important to recognize that each centre is equipped with all the training modules for Literacy, Education, Health, Disability-training and Employment-related skills, so that any module can be used in response to local need. Each Centre for example, will be able to train Visually Impaired persons of the local area, without having to go to a distant special school or training facility. Another far-reaching Project that has been recently formulated and launched is the Braille Literacy Initiative, designed to enable visually impaired children to be taught Braille at home by the mother or any literate member of the family with the help of a device called the Vasantha Braille Teacher, designed but Vidya Vrikshah. The Vasantha Braille Teacher is a small plastic cube, somewhat like the Rubik's Cube. It is made of three cross-sections, held together on a spindle which forms a common axis, on which they can be rotated. There are raised dots embossed on the visible surfaces of the three sections. The sections can be rotated to form a dot pattern on one of the cube's sides, corresponding to any one of the possible 63 braille codes. You thus have a toy where the blind child can be taught to form and then read by touch, the braille codes of the letters of the alphabet of its mother tongue. Guidance can provided by the mother or any other person, with the help of a ready reference card that is provided, which carries images of all the letters and their corresponding braille codes, in whatever is the mother tongue. The child can be taught later to use extra cubes to form more letters and line them up to form words. Training can be started quite early when the maximum tactile sensitivity and reading efficiency can be established. The device has been sent to nearly 200 blind schools all over the country for evaluation and the initial feedback already coming in shows considerable enthusiasm over its value as a teaching tool. Blind schools have also been asked not only to use the device in their institutions, but also consider adopting outreach programs to promote its use in homes in villages in their neighborhood.

This Project along with the Braille Magazine Project, to be complemented later in schools by Voice-based IT solutions described earlier, promises to provide a comprehensive and powerful national strategy for the spread of braille-based literacy and education in the country.



The Learning Network Initiative - by Jayashree Janardhan

The Learning Network was initiated by Asha in 2002 to help expand individual innovative approaches to education and learning. Asha volunteers S. Shanmuga, Jayashree Janardhan and Anita Balasubramaniam have been driving this effort. The network seeks to disseminate successful approaches to learning to more schools/teachers and interested groups.

The network currently has over 30 participating groups and is constantly expanding. Participants are resource persons/centers, alternative schools, community schools and government departments such as DPEP (District primary education program) interested in education reform. Over the past year, the network has organized various teacher workshops on topics such as science, arts and crafts. A series of workshops were conducted on

increasing the role of arts and crafts in the curriculum (including in the teaching more conventional subjects) - and thereby encouraging children to learn by doing. This has benefited several schools and over 80 teachers have benefitted from these trainings. The network now plans to explore the area of "Conflict Resolution and school teachers". A mini-conference is being organized in Delhi on Nov 8th and 9th 2003 to explore the area of diversity/conflict resolution and specifically its impact on schooling. Today, many schools and teachers still use child beating and harsh forms of punishment when faced with conflict within school premises. There are several stereotypes promoted within schools due to lack of recognition for diversity, gender, special abilities or cultural background.

The conference will aim to create a resource

group and identify available tools and resources to help address the following areas at a practical level within schools. Once the resource group is created, the network hopes to work with many school teachers to address these areas.

1. Conflict within school - Discipline techniques used in school - teacher student relationships.
2. Stereotypes and biases - how they are formed and propagated
3. Discrimination based on colour of the skin/physical features
4. Gender stereotypes and associated biases
5. Intolerance based on religion/caste/culture
6. Stereotypes and biases with varying abilities/disabilities
7. Methods, skills for conflict resolution and the role of a teacher at the school.

Seattle to Portland

by Pankaj Sethi



At Winlock, WA: From left to right are Praveen, Pankaj, Amit, and Binay

At 5:30 in the morning on July 12th, I was standing near Husky stadium waiting for rest of my team members to show up. Seven of us (Amit, Binay, Pankaj, Prashant, Praveen, Ravi, and Sunil) were a part of Team Asha and none had participated in this event before. All of us were looking forward to a great adventure for the next two days. We were getting ready to ride our bicycles from Seattle to Portland and covering a distance of 206 miles in two days.

"Seattle to Portland (STP) Bicycle Classic" is an annual event organized by Cascade Bicycle Club. The club organizes several rides all around the year and educates people with every aspect of cycling. I had been dreaming to do this ride even before I moved to Seattle. Team Asha looked like a perfect way for me to accomplish my goal.

That morning we were accompanied by over 7000 cyclists. I had never seen so many cyclists at one place. The morning weather conditions were perfect for cycling. Few of us (including me) started out pretty fast and covered first 50 miles very quickly, while others followed us at their own pace. I did not stay ahead for very long. Soon I had three punctures, one followed by the other; and I saw our slowest rider passing me by while I was busy fixing the puncture in my tire.

Food stops were the most awaited landmarks during the ride. These food stops were serving sports drinks, fruits, sandwiches, bagels etc every 25 miles. We made sure to load ourselves on each of those stops. Except for one steep hill in Puyallup, first day was mostly flats and gentle rolling hills. We rode till Winlock and covered a distance of 120 miles before deciding to call it a day.

The morning of the second day was as pretty as the first one. We started before 6:00 am and we had another 86 miles to cover. The scenery was very pleasant that morning as we rode through picturesque winding roads with several rolling hills along the way. Three hours into the ride and it started pouring down very heavily. We crossed Columbia River, all wet and soggy. We were now in Oregon and with only 50 more miles to go. After a stop at St Helens (at 175 miles), we paced ourselves again and started pedaling with whatever was left in us. These were the quickest miles of the day. We reached the finish line later in the afternoon with exhausted body and sore knees.

Riders received a lot of support from their friends and family, who helped them in raising over \$5000 for Asha. The money went to an organization in Chennai to buy a Braille printing machine. The machine will be used to print materials that will be circulated among blind children.



Ravi and Sunil at a food stop

Asha for Education
23608 NE 45th place
Redmond, WA 98053



Return Service Requested



Asha Contribution Slip

I am enclosing:

50\$ 100\$ 150\$

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

email: _____

Please make your checks payable to 'Asha for Education'.
You can mail your contribution to:

Asha for Education
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 next meeting and venue are on <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.

Jayashree, Ashok - 425 868 9819

Anju, Sanjay - 425 391 1530

Swati Sircar - 206-240-6058

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