



Asha Kiran

Asha-Seattle's quarterly Newsletter

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Greetings Everyone,

In this issue of Asha Kiran, we feature the Advocacy group, a focus group conceptualized by Asha Seattle volunteers. Asha has been phenomenally instrumental in disbursing funds to its project partners in India who are mostly grass roots activists, but we felt the need to have a more hands-on approach. Till now, Asha had only minimal influence on government policy making or maximizing implementation of existing policies. As a result of mis- or non-implementation of recommended policies, we are faced with strikingly different rates of development in different parts of India. Though these glaring regional variations can sometimes be ascribed to socio-cultural practices, this level of disparity makes one lose hope at times. The Advocacy group intends to utilize Asha's influence to lobby for policy-level changes in India. This active participation can ensure that Asha can face the major socio-economic issues that have literally crippled our country in spite of a post-independence growth spurt (as measured by GDP/GNP). The second article deals with these regional variations with respect to gender-based issues and underlines the power of legislative reforms and increased public awareness levels. We will have many more articles by Advocacy group members in future issues of Asha Kiran. So, do keep a look-out.

Sunil's article, in this issue, will give you another perspective

of the present situation. In most cases, the Government or International charity organizations dole out huge amounts of donations yearly to our country. But, this usually gets lost in a quagmire of impractical and "white elephant" schemes and as a result, in spite of aid pouring in, we do not see tangible improvement in the day to day lives. He describes this scenario through Ravi Kuchimanchi's (founder of AID) experience. Asha Seattle hosted Ravi and a few others this year to share their experience with our volunteers so that we could learn first hand the situation as it exists.

As usual, we have a few announcements to make. Please support our runners participating in this years Seattle marathon in November. We also look forward to your continued support through the annual "Give" campaign of your organizations. And time for some fun....do join us for some foot-tapping Bollywood music in our annual fund-raiser, AllGoRhythms. Another important achievement for us is that Asha for Education has maintained 4-star rating by Charity Navigator for organizational efficiency, organizational capacity and fiscal responsibility. Way to go! For more information, visit our website, www.ashanet.org/seattle. Do contact us at seattle@ashanet.org if you have any comments or concerns.

Thank you,
The Asha Seattle Team.

The Asha Advocacy Group: Means of Change

Raghav Kausik

Asha for Education does an excellent job of partnering with various groups in India that perform grass roots work. For this purpose, Asha solicits donations which are then disbursed at zero overhead. A lot of work is involved in this seemingly simple process, such as identifying genuine partner groups, evaluating their proposals, maintenance of regular contact with the partner groups, publicity for various fund drives, keeping accounts of the disbursed amounts for tax auditing, etc. Today, Asha has over sixty chapters world-wide and raises over one million US dollars annually. All of these funds are maximally utilized for grass roots activities for bringing about socio-economic changes through education. Quite impressive indeed!

The time has come to ask whether a large organization such as Asha should merely continue doing what it already is doing, namely being a "slam dunk" charity, or expand the nature and scope of its activities. While what Asha currently does is immensely valuable, it does not directly influence government policy or bring pressure on the government for

better implementation of existing policies. Let's consider the implementation of some Government schemes in schools as an example. Several reports had showed that Government policies such as the mid-day meal program can have a huge impact on education. It is well-known that introducing the mid-day meal program into schools tremendously increased attendance in schools. To quote the renowned development economist, Jean Dreze, "...well-devised school meals have much to contribute to the advancement of elementary education, child nutrition, and social equity". However, while examining the history of the mid-day meal program implementation in India, we learn that this was not done at the behest of well-intentioned government officials. Rather, it was the widespread lobbying of grass root organizations that this scheme finally saw the light of the day. The "Right to Food" campaign (web site is <http://www.righttofoodindia.org>) was instrumental in leading up to the Supreme Court ruling on November 28, 2001 asking all states to introduce cooked meals in all government and government-

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assisted primary schools. There are many other groups working towards policy-level advocacy. Another example is CRY (Child Relief and You) which is engaged in promoting NAFRE, the National Alliance for Fundamental Right to Education.

The Advocacy group at Asha-Seattle was recently initiated with the intention of utilizing Asha's influence to lobby for policy-level changes in the educational system of India. While we began by analyzing the current NCERT curriculum framework for middle schools, the topic of focus that has emerged from our discussion groups is gender-based issues, including education. The rationale for this, other than the obvious moral imperative, is that studies have shown that women's empowerment has far-reaching consequences on overall development. For example, women's education is the single most influential factor in improving child health and in reducing infant mortality. Women's education also directly impacts the fertility rate, which is the average number of children per couple. A fertility rate of 2.1 is the replacement rate, whereby a population replaces itself. Recent statistics show that India fares very poorly in women's education. As of 2001, only 47% of adult women were literate in India, in contrast to figures like 97% and 88.6% for Cuba and Sri Lanka, respectively. In fact, India is much worse than Bangladesh on several human development factors, even though India's growth rate (in terms of GDP) is much higher. For instance, maternal mortality rates in India and Bangladesh

are 540 and 380 per 100,000 live births, respectively. Several indicators of gender bias, such as the female male ratios in primary education, and labor force participation also place Bangladesh in a more favorable light. Very laudably, Bangladesh actually spends almost double the amount that India does, as a percentage of the GDP, on public health. All of this goes to show the utterly lop-sided and distorted nature of India's development strategy. Even within India, the disparity between the various states is quite striking (please see the following article "Looking Beyond Numbers"). For example, the fertility rates in Kerala and Tamil Nadu are less than 2.1 (the replacement rate), whereas the fertility rate of Rajasthan is 4.2. Similarly, while the overall female male ratio for India is 1058:1000, the corresponding ratio in specific pockets like Haryana is much lower, at 861:1000. Indeed, one of the primary reasons why states such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh have much higher literacy rates is because these states have ensured empowerment of women through various policy implementations.

It is worth reflecting how a free and open press in a democratic society ought to handle these issues. If we are to believe the often repeated clichéd taglines of media empires, we would expect these issues to make the headlines of our papers. However, as we know from media reporting today that nothing could be farther from reality. This real picture of India, being far removed from the image of a glitzy, booming software

empire that is emerging as a major economic superpower, is simply not newsworthy always! It is preferable or rather "fashionable" to express outrage, instead, at the plight of women under the Taliban while turning a blind eye to the atrocities at home. This ought to tell us a good deal about the intellectual and moral culture of our times.

The Advocacy group continues to study these and other issues. Our findings are posted as referenced blog entries, accompanied by pertinent bibliography (please see [http://volunteer thoughts.blogspot.com/](http://volunteerthoughts.blogspot.com/)). These articles are meant to provide information to the reader and also to initiate discussions. The advocacy group plans to network with other like-minded groups in India and US and through petitions, focus on lobbying-based campaigns to bring about changes in exiting policies. The other goal of the group is to spread awareness among the local community and among volunteers. We plan to do this through blogging, public presentations/workshops and discussion forum. If you are interested in joining the group or knowing more about it, please contact seattle@ashanet.org.

Raghav is an Asha Seattle volunteer actively involved in the Advocacy focus group, its inception and continuation. To know more about the activities of this group and its members, do visit and post your thoughts at <http://volunteerthoughts.blogspot.com>.

Looking Beyond Numbers

A quiz with a twist was put up on a blogging website by the Advocacy focus group volunteers. This article tries to capture the essence of the purpose of this exercise; the fact that there are many aspects in our socio-economic background that we take for granted but the ground reality may be really vastly different. "India" may be "shining" but not so for the millions of underprivileged who do not have access to the basic fundamental needs of life.

The following quiz is meant to highlight various women's issues encompassing empowerment, health and development across various states of India. The numbers are from the UN Human Development reports, the Census of India, NFHS and NSSO surveys. When you answer these questions, think beyond the numbers.....look at the disparity between the various regions of India and across socio-cultural mores. Even after 50+ years of post-independence policy implementations, we have such stark

regional variations. See for yourself...the maternal mortality rate in India varies from the 20-50's in Tamil Nadu and Kerala to 980 in Assam or 700 in Madhya Pradesh.

In our day to day thinking, we do not link gender-based disparities with various development-associated "backwardness". In reality, this is a vicious cycle where lack of education together with lack of resources lead to poverty and this results in illiteracy, poor health, malnutrition etc,

especially affecting women and children because of the so-called "gender gap". Perhaps the starkest inequality is revealed by this simple fact: girls aged 1-5 are 50% more likely to die than boys. Access to educational opportunities did provide women with new options during the late period of indenture and schooling began to have a much more positive influence in the lives of many women in the post-independence era. Despite these changes, access to formal employment and equal status were never fully achieved, even for "educated" women. Women's empowerment and autonomy was restricted by the gendered ideology of various cultures, and continuation of patriarchal societal constructs. In an encouraging study, it has been recently shown that at places where gender disparity has been reduced, an overall improvement in various dimensions like health care, literacy and fertility rates have been noted.

What do you think one can do? This is where mass public action and awareness becomes critical to ensure that the voices of the disadvantaged do not get drowned under the cacophony of the rich and powerful few. Campaigns for legal reform are important aids for focusing on injustice and discrimination against women. However, we have to remember that the reforms themselves will not bring social justice in all situations. Some reforms fail to yield any positive feedback due to a lack of social acceptance and legal enforcement (e.g., dowry prohibition act, widow remarriage act, etc). Therefore, to ensure women's empowerment in our society, along with these legal reforms (including property rights, Panchayat representation, constitutional rights), we ourselves have to undergo a sea change in our awareness levels as a part of the society.

1. The adult female literacy rate for the year 2003 (age 15+) in Cuba is ~97%, that in China is 86.5% and Sri Lanka is 88.6%. What is the overall female literacy rate in India in 2003?

- a. Between 25-30%
- b. Between 70-75%
- c. Between 55-60%
- d. Between 45-50%

2. India is characterized by enormous variations in regional experiences and achievements. These regional variations are a rich source of insights on the interconnections between economic development, public action and social progress. For instance, the district level female literacy rates in 1991 vary from 8% to 94%. The literacy rate among females age 7+ in Himachal Pradesh was 68%, in Gujarat is 59%. What is this rate in Bihar?

- a. Between 10-15%
- b. Between 55-60%
- c. Between 35-40%
- d. Between 45-50%

3. In India, public service infrastructure, such as schools, infrastructure in schools, number of teachers per school, vary a lot. The proportion of primary schools in Kerala with atmost two teachers in 1999-2000 was 1%, India overall was 58% and in U.P. was 63%. The proportion of males aged 10-12 who have NEVER been enrolled in a school (1992-93) in U.P. was 19%, in Kerala was 1%. What is this % for females in U.P.?

- a. Between 20-25%
- b. Between 30-35%
- c. Between 40-45%
- d. Between 55-60%

4. There is fairly strong medical evidence to the effect that - given

similar care - women tend to have lower age-specific mortality rates than men. The ratio of female to male mortality in 1996-98 for the age group 0-4 in West Bengal was 91% (91 female deaths in 0-4 age group for 100 male deaths). Similarly, this number in Bihar was 117%. What is this number for Punjab?

- a. 111%
- b. 120%
- c. 130%
- d. 150%

5. Inequality between men and women is one of the crucial disparities in many societies and this is particularly so in India. The female-male ratio in defined as number of females per 1000 males. In Kerala, the ratio was around 1058 in 2001, in Maharashtra it was 922, in Bihar it was 926. What is this ratio for Haryana?

- a. 919
- b. 903
- c. 873
- d. 861

6. The legal age for marriage in India is 18 years for females. The percentage of girls in Himachal Pradesh who were married before 18 years of age was 11%; the corresponding figure for Maharashtra was 48%. What was this figure in Andhra Pradesh?

- a. 15-20%
- b. 30-35%
- c. 50-55%
- d. 60-65%

The answers are:- 1d ; 2c; 3c; 4c; 5d; 6d.

The ideas and views expressed in this article solely belong to the editor and in no way represent Asha for Education's viewpoints.

Miles for Smiles

Miles for Smiles, the marathon training program, is one of our flagship annual fund-raising events. Participants experience the unique personal challenge for running the marathon, while raising funds for basic education in India. It is a true opportunity for tremendous personal accomplishment and a tangible contribution to the cause. Our last year's donation drive collected \$23K. This is our third year and our target is to raise \$50K. The proceeds will go to **SUPPORT - Society for Undertaking Poor People for Rehabilitation.**

We request you to pledge your support for the runners participating in the Seattle and Portland marathon(s). For more information about the runners and how to donate, please visit our **website at <http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/events/marathon/>**

Learning to AID: Problems and Solutions

Sunil Laxman

Ravi Kuchimanchi, the founder of Association for India's Development (AID) was in Seattle on 26 th July to talk about his experience in rural development in India. This was organized by Asha Seattle and was attended by about 35 people in a relaxed and informal setting. It was a long and fruitful journey for Ravi, from being a US-trained physicist to a full-fledged grass roots worker in India. Ravi spoke about the "rural technology" center which is trying to document and revive various age-old traditional know-how as an alternative to the "modern" technology. According to him, ancient wisdom had more science to it than would meet the eye and this fits in well with the existing complexity of different socio-economic issues in India. He also spoke briefly about the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan', its repercussions and the involvement of AID in various efforts like Tsunami relief and rehabilitation.

The idea that emerges from interacting with Ravi was the practicality in both his vision and approach. Without brandishing the so-called fire-brand radicalism, he sought practical and contextually relevant solutions to everyday problems realizing that the people concerned themselves are as much a part of the problem as any other extraneous causes. What Ravi (and AID) managed to do was foster community involvement and provide incentives for problem solving without encouraging internal conflicts to take over; basically, AID worked as a catalyst to facilitate the affected people themselves to seek out the solution, keeping in mind the specifics of their circumstances and the problem itself.

This is an article in three parts describing Ravi's experience and discussing the ramifications. This originally appeared as a blog entry by Asha volunteer Sunil Laxman (<http://balancinglife.blogspot.com/2005/07/learning-to-aid-i-problems-and.html>). Comments, queries et al.... please do post your replies on Sunil's blog.

Ravi took us to an archetypical Indian village, somewhere along the Orissa-

Andhra border. When AID first went there, a wizened old freedom fighter took some of the AID volunteers around, pointing out problems. He first pointed at a silted well (which still had water), and the volunteers didn't realize what the problem was. Then he took them to a larger tank, deeply silted, with reeds growing all around it, which still held water. The volunteers still didn't get it, as they saw water there (something missing in many dry villages). Then they realized how badly silted the tank was, and what its consequences could be.

So, they met the farmers in the village, and asked them about the tank. The villagers understood the consequences of silting and were worried about the quality of water. The older farmers said that the silt was actually rich in nutrients, and, in the old days, farmers would come by before every planting season, and take the fertile silt away from the tank on their bullock carts to use in their fields. That way, the tank would remain well-maintained, while their fields would benefit. So, the volunteers asked why the practice was discontinued.

They discovered that the farmers were quite marginal, and over time they were unable to afford to maintain bullock carts (though most had bullocks to plough their fields). So, there were no carts in the village. The few farmers in the village who could afford carts had shifted to

using fertilizers, and did not need silt. So, the tank was dying, and they now worried about future water sources.

Invariably, government or even NGO "fact-finding" missions do not bother to involve villagers. They come. They see. They "understand all". The problem: silted tank. The solution: de-silt the tank." So, thousands of rupees would be spent on desilting the tank, which is silted again by the next monsoon. Or else, some well-meaning person somewhere far away will come up with a brainwave like thrusting a tractor upon the villagers for desilting purposes.

But if they had involved the villagers, they would have heard the following questions from the villagers. You may desilt it this year, but what happens next year? Who would pay for the fuel that a tractor needs? What happens if the tractor broke down, how could they repair it? Spare parts, as well as the much-needed fuel, were expensive and available only in distant villages. Who would maintain and take responsibility of the tractor?

Clearly, just desilting the tank or a tractor would be a stopgap arrangement, and not an effective long term solution. Instead it would create 6 new problems!

In this case, AID found that a bullock cart would effectively help solve the problem!

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GIVE Campaign

Many companies have an annual "Giving campaign". This is generally a yearly event when employees of a company pledge money to their favorite charitable organization(s). For example, Microsoft & many other companies in the greater Seattle area have initiated their annual "Giving" campaign in the month of October this year. A variety of events like non-profit agency fairs and information sessions are organized during this time. **Asha Seattle's annual commitment for next year (2006) is over \$575,000** which is pledged to our different partner groups in India. Our work requires serious and recurring commitment over the years. Company giving campaigns are our main source of fund-raising and we hope you would consider us again during your company's Giving campaign. **We are looking forward to your continued support in our endeavor to bring about socio-economic change in India through the medium of education.**

Comments, queries and questions, please contact Srijan at Srijan@gmail.com

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But, does it end there? Would just giving a bullock cart have solved this problem?

AID talked to the villagers further. It could have ended right there, if AID had just given a bullock cart and two bullocks to the village, thinking the problem was solved. But the villagers very quickly pointed out that that would not work. If two bullocks were given, it would be very likely that the bullocks would be beaten to death, or underfed, or ill-treated, since belonging to everyone meant that they wouldn't belong to anyone. So, if bullocks were given, they would need to hire some one to look after them as well, an added expense! So, the villagers themselves proposed to use their own bullocks, hitched to the cart that would be provided by AID for taking away the silt.

But even this wasn't the complete solution. There is more than one type of bullock cart. The "modern" cart, popularized by various groups and government subsidies, is a cart with pneumatic tires. This is effective in improving mobility and reducing load on bullocks, but only on even, level roads. The villagers, who clearly knew much more about bullock carts than any city-slicker did, collectively and unanimously said that the modern "tire" carts would never work. This was because the axles for these carts were extremely low. The tank was in marshy ground, didn't have a road leading to it, and in order to take the silt out effectively, the cart needed to be taken into the tank itself. The old-fashioned large wooden wheeled bullock cart was perfectly suited for this task, but the "tire" carts were hopelessly inadequate.

In addition, repairing a traditional cart was something any farmer could do, but the rocky roads and rough terrain would easily puncture the tires of the modern "tire" carts, and repairs would be tedious, difficult and costly.

So, incredibly, the best solution in this case proved to be an old fashioned, cheap bullock cart. And the villagers themselves came up with the solution.

There were more levels of effectiveness. If a cart had been given to the community, in all probability in a few years it would have been broken down and become useless. Instead, if the cart was given as a cooperative loan, with the promise that once the cost of the cart had been repaid the same money would be given back to the community for another new need, the villagers would feel a strong incentive to use the cart well, AND repay it, in order to gain new benefits.

Incentive and involvement: two key aspects that AID understood came from talking to the villagers.

It is now easy to understand why so many million dollar Government or World Bank schemes have failed miserably. These top down schemes, especially those determined by some officials sitting in a distant office, are very ineffective, and sometimes cause newer problems.

Ravi used a nice analogy to explain this. He asked us what Thakur Baldev Singh had told Jai and Veeru (in Sholay) when they asked him why he wanted them to catch Gabbar. Remembering my Sholay lines well, I said "Kyon ki loha lohe ko kaat-ta hain" (because steel cuts steel).

That beautifully sums up the situation.

The villagers did indeed represent the problems, but they represented the solutions as well. Just as we do.

To be Continued...