



Asha Kiran

Asha-Seattle's quarterly Newsletter

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Greetings Everyone,

In this edition of Asha Kiran, we discuss the current plight of the Bandhyali School (run by Digantar) in Rajasthan. This school has had a very special contribution to childrens' education in and around Bandhyali, providing quality education to girls, especially from the backward community. Now, the Jaipur Development Authority is threatening to usurp the land on which the school has been functioning for the last 20 years. Do visit digantar.blogspot.com for the latest information and leave your comments about the present situation. We do have some good news to share with you – the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (www.bhopal.net) and the Association for India's Development (www.aidindia.org), with cooperation from other organizations like Asha has finally succeeded in procuring justice for those affected by the Bhopal Gas tragedy of 1984 following a long drawn-out public mass movement. We have details about this in this issue. We'd like to thank all of you for endorsing our letter to the Indian Government in support of the Bhopal survivors and their demand for justice.

We have an article about urban slums, with special focus on the Government policy decisions and implementations. This has been adapted from a presentation by Rahul at an Asha Seattle workshop meeting held recently in Redmond. We also conclude the discussion session that Asha Seattle volunteers had with the visiting AID founder, Ravi Kuchimanchi. Thanks to Sunil for allowing us to reproduce his blog on Ravi's grass roots experience as a three part article.

We do have a couple of announcements- one calling for volunteers for the Seattle to Portland bike event and also for the Seattle Marathon

events. Do get back to us if you want to participate or volunteer in any of these events. Also, as in the past, we will be hosting different social activists in informal discussion forums about their experience. On May 6th, we have among us, Mr. ES Ramamurthy, who is the founder member of Sivasri Trust. The trust oversees the Sikshana project to improve the quality of education in public schools.

To expand our learning and knowledge base and also to create volunteer awareness about the current socio-economic issues of India, we have been hosting intra chapter workshop meetings. We hope that these workshops, along with the discussion forums in the "Advocacy" focus group, will be a great learning experience for all volunteers, old or new. If you want to attend any of these meetings, do drop us a line at seattle@ashanet.org.

In addition, we thank everyone- the audience, participants as well as the volunteers- who made this year's Gitanjali a roaring success.

Do check out our webpage for announcements about upcoming events. And, if you want to make a difference, do join us as a volunteer or simply walk into one of our workshop sessions or simply shoot an email to seattle@ashanet.org

We thank all of our donors for your generous and continued support which goes a long way to make "a socio-economic change through the medium of education" possible. For more information, visit our website, www.ashanet.org/seattle. Comments or suggestions are deeply appreciated.

Thank you,
The Asha Seattle Team.

Urban Slums in India-the myths and the reality

[This article is based on a presentation by Rahul at an Asha Seattle workshop held recently in Redmond. This is mainly to give an idea about what we know about "slums" in India and what the present day scenario in India is for people eking out their daily lives below the poverty line and whether there are any realistic policy goals that can stem the growth of these slums. This article also describes the different Government policies implemented through the 50's till present, with special emphasis on Maharashtra, and discusses the pros and cons of these policies. -Editor]

Slums...the picture that conjures up in our minds is that of a dirty, unhygienic group of make shift shanties with long lines of people waiting at the Municipal water pump, bawling babies literally left on street corners to fend for themselves and endless cries of help. When did India slide into this chaos?

According to a recently conducted survey, 22% of Indian urban

population lives in slums as against 32% for the whole world population; most, if not all of these people earn under the urban poverty line. Data from a study by National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) reported that among the poorest cities were Calcutta (89% below the poverty line), Bangalore (73%) and Indore (68%). More disturbingly, there was a gender divide in the distribution of urban poor in the slums: NIUA reported that 68% of this group consisted of women. Also notable is the fact that 6 million of this population is in the age group 0-6.

If we consider a specific case of the glittering metropolis of Mumbai, it appears that 55% of the total population of 11 million are slum dwellers occupying about 12.85% of the city's total land area. There has been an increase of 4% in the number of households living in one-room tenements in the span of a decade, 1981 to 1991 (Government of Maharashtra, 1995). Also, 8.5 million of the city's population lives in sub-standard or unsafe housing conditions under

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the continuous threat of displacement.

Are Slums a Problem? From a mainstream view, it can be said that slums “spoil” the look of the city. Because slums breed poverty and high unemployment, there is a high crime rate stemming from these neighborhoods. Since these are illegal settlements on encroached public land, they do not pay the basic or civic utilities taxes expected from any legal settlements in a city. However to be fair, we should consider the prevalent conditions in these urban slums from another viewpoint—slums have inhuman and dangerous living conditions with a total lack of security and a fear of demolition at any point. They do not have basic civic services like waste collection and disposal, clean drinking water, properly maintained drainage system, electricity or paved roads. Take the issue of equitable distribution of municipal water: even in cities claiming 100 percent coverage, the per capita availability varies 10 times between poor/slum and rich locations. For instance, in Ahmedabad, 25% of the population consumed 90% of the water while the rest 75% had to do with only 10%. Sanitary conditions are literally non-existent in slums: infant mortality rates are higher by 1.8 times in slums as compared to non-slum areas. It has been reported that nearly 50% of urban child mortality is the result of poor sanitation and lack of access to clean drinking water in the urban slums. Slum dwellers constantly live with the fear of losing their home (sometimes they invest thousands to build these) and their possessions to demolishers. Many settlements have been demolished again and again, even though they were built before 1995, which according to the government are legal houses. In spite of many of these people having proper documentation (ration cards, Vote ID cards) to prove their domicile legally, there has been no respite. In this whole rigmarole of demolitions and re-settlements, huge amounts of money pass hands as bribe to the police, goons and corporations. Also, these demolitions are not preceded by proper notices; India, as a signatory to UN Human Rights treaty is bound to follow certain procedure before any evictions.

Hear it first hand from one of these slum dwellers: “I used to live in Tatanagar in Govandi. For the past seven or eight years, I did not have any problem with water, as 14 of us shared a tap. Before that, we had to go quite a distance. The municipality had provided five taps, but there was no road beside the tracks to reach them. So we had to walk between the tracks for 10–15 minutes. There used to be lots of fights for filling water. We had to queue for as long as an hour and

we had to leave our children behind. Once, my small daughter walked out of the house and sat on the railway track. I saw a train approaching as I walked back with water. I threw the handaa down and ran towards my daughter. I managed to pick her up just before the train roared past. There used to be many people who came to fill the water and they came from far. I used to drop my children at school and then go to fetch water around one o'clock in the afternoon. I used to finish filling water by five in the evening. To fill one handaa, I needed to stand in the queue for one hour. I would take it home, empty it and go back and stand in the queue again. I could not afford to buy water as it used to cost five rupees for one handaa.

For toilets, we had to use the railway tracks. There were public toilets, but they were some distance away – about half an hour walk. They used to be so dirty that we did not feel like using them. And there were such long queues! Instead of using those filthy toilets, we used to go on the tracks after ten at night or early in the morning at four or five o'clock.”

What leads to this booming increase in slum settlements in a city: think rapid and uncontrolled urbanization which is intimately connected with migration from suburban and rural areas, think the unavailability of basic minimum wages and basic perks (like affordable housing schemes) for these people. What has the Government done to tackle this?

So, what is the solution to this? Evictions and demolitions have been seen by the state as one of the major solutions to the “problems” of slums. The rights of slum dweller to shelter, basic amenities, etc. have also been marginally and occasionally addressed. There has been no consistent or unified Government policy through the 50's till the 90's except for a policy of brute force demolition. For example, section 354A was introduced to the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) Act in 1954 that empowered the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai to clear slums in a totalitarian fashion. In 1956, the then central Government approved a Slum Clearance Plan. Bombay was one of the six pilot cities covered under this scheme which would lead to blatant use of force to clear these tenements. According to the Maharashtra Vacant Lands (Prohibition of Unauthorised Structures and Summary Eviction) Act, 1975 all land encroached by squatters can be considered vacant, and all slums covered by the Act can be removed. What's more...the “squatters” have to pay ‘compensation’ for unauthorized occupation of land.

However, the realization dawned slowly that demolition and re-settlement is not the answer. Resettlement in most cases proceeded erratically and was dependent on the whims and fancies of local municipal officials and the affected poor were completely excluded from any decision-making. This led to the Slum Improvement Program in the 70's to improve the basic amenities like drainage, drinking water, roads, toilets etc. However, the 80's again saw another spate of demolitions in Mumbai; on a positive note, the Supreme court ruled that eviction of the petitioners (slum dwellers) will lead to deprivation of their livelihood and consequently to the deprivation of their life and violates Article 21.

The story continues with the efforts of the Government and policy makers at the top; however, no one really asks the people who have been affected on what their position is. The Slum Upgrading Programme (SUP) funded by the World Bank in 1985 covered only 22,000 households and was terminated in 1994. The Slum Redevelopment Scheme (1991) provided some new incentives for private developers and builders to redevelop slums— such as the ability to transfer development rights to other areas of the city. The theory was that by selling the extra space in the open market, tenements for slum dwellers would be cross-subsidized and made affordable to them. However, this was a big non-starter due to the existing skepticism of the slum dwellers for developer/builders, given their history of forcible evictions in the past; on the other hand, the builders themselves did not think this to be a good business opportunity nor did they anticipate a good return on their investment. 1995 saw the Slum Rehabilitation Scheme, an election promise by the Shiv Sena that would provide free tenements to 4 million slum dwellers. However, this also bit dust as only about 19,000 tenements were completed finally. The Shivshahi Punarvasan Prakalp Ltd that was constituted in 1998 to provide re-settlement actually turned to be a scheme that enriched Mumbai's powerful construction lobby by robbing both public assets and the urban poor (S.S. Tinaikar Committee, 2001).

In 2001, the Government and NGOs formulated the slum resettlement plan for 60,000 people. The Draft National Slum Policy of 2001 initiated a newer level of understanding of the issue of urban slums—that slums are an integral part of urban areas and contribute significantly to their economy both through their labor market contributions and informal production activities. Rather than looking at slums as “problem areas”

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which need "corrective action", local bodies should recognize the contribution made by slums and make sufficient provision for them to have access to affordable land, housing sites and services. It was carried out with popular participation and partnerships with NGOs that had been involved in the recent Mumbai Urban Transport Project. The resettled families had a mixed response. On the one hand they were happy to have secure tenure and access to basic services but on the other hand the resettlement location offered fewer employment opportunities and led to increased travel costs for quite a few.

On the whole, this policy broadens the definition of slums to include all under-serviced areas. It does not advocate slum clearance policies except under strict resettlement & rehabilitation guidelines which

are defined in respect of slums located on untenable sites. The different issues that should be kept in mind when dealing with in situ resettlement and rehabilitation plans of urban slums include: affordable housing, security of tenure, innovative and cost-effective designs, assurance of basic amenities, and most of all community participation. All urban informal settlements should have access to certain basic minimum services irrespective of land tenure or occupancy status. The major areas that still need to be addressed to have a clear policy on urban slums include: town planning, land management, poverty alleviation, basic service delivery and capacity building.

Bhopalis celebrate a victory of a lifetime

"It's a momentous victory for the indefatigable spirit of the Bhopalis. This campaign showed that the world is watching and the governments cannot flee from taking responsibility of its own citizens," -Kirankumar Vissa, Director, Association for India's Development.

A long fought well deserved victory . The never-say-die spirit of the people affected by the Bhopal Gas disaster has finally paid off. 21 years after the world's worst industrial disaster at a Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal, Bhopalis finally made Government of India accept their just demands for justice and a life of dignity. The survivors and other residents have been denied even basic amenities like access to clean drinking water. Neither Dow Chemical (which fully acquired Union Carbide and its liabilities) nor Government of India have addressed the situation in Bhopal. 51 Bhopalis affected by the disaster along with three activists from ICJB (International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal), marched 800 km on foot to Delhi to achieve their long awaited redressal. The month-long march started on February 20, 2006 and was followed by an indefinite hunger strike by padayatris at Delhi;

Bhopalis set forth six demands to the Government of India:

- 1. Set up a national commission to improve health and economic conditions of the gas affected**
- 2. Provide safe drinking water**
- 3. Prosecute Union Carbide and Warren Anderson**
- 4. Make Dow clean up the factory and pay for it**

5. Stop Government purchase of Dow products and halt any expansion of Dow's business in India till it accepts the pending liabilities in Bhopal.

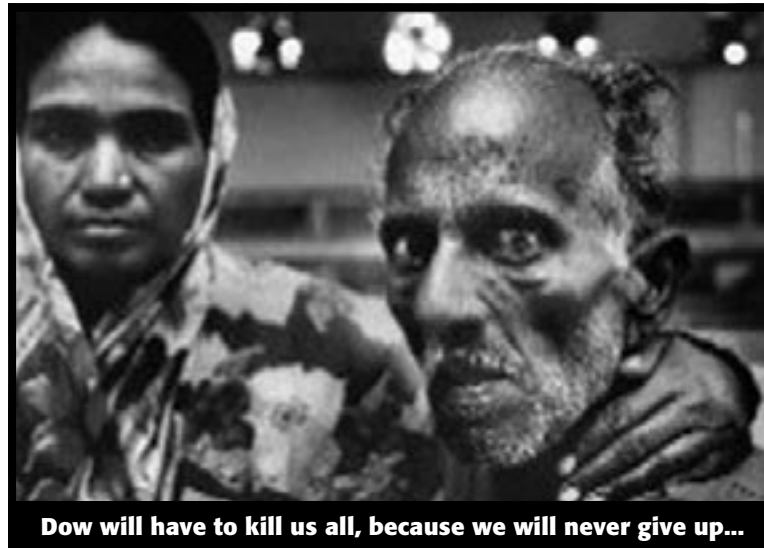
6. Commemorate the disaster with full involvement of the survivors and make the disaster a part of school curriculum

In support of the Bhopal survivors, concerned Americans and Indian diaspora from 17 cities across the US (Washington DC, New York, Boston, Austin, Houston, Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego, Atlanta, Tempe, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Princeton, Ann Arbor and Chicago) initiated demonstrations and vigils. Bhopal Support groups in the United States called and emailed the Indian Embassy and Consulates in the US, since February 20th, urging the Indian government to address the issues raised by the Bhopalis. Over 400 international supporters pledged to fast for at least a day in solidarity with the Bhopal hunger strikers and bombarded the Prime Ministers office in Delhi with over 3000 faxes.

On the seventh day of their indefinite hunger strike, the Bhopal survivors called off their protests as the Prime Minister conceded to four of the six long-standing demands on April 17, 2006. The Prime Minister did not agree to prosecute the multinational corporation and its CEO and also refused to halt the expansion of Dow until it accepts its liabilities.

For further and up-to-date information, please visit www.studentsforbhopal.org & www.bhopal.net

Get active in Seattle ! icjb.seattle@gmail.com



Save Bandhyali School

[With inputs from NDTV presentation "Authorities order demolition of Jaipur school" on Dec. 15, '05, "Cry, My Beloved School" by Deepti Priya Mehrotra available at <http://www.boloji.com/wfs5/wfs532.htm>, Article "School for poor kids faces demolition threat" appearing in The Hindu on Dec 29, '05 and digantar.blogspot.com.

In the latest development, JDA, under the supervision of the Hon'ble High Court of Rajasthan, has offered alternative sites for relocating the Bandhyali School. Digantar has accepted one such relocation schemes, but the details are yet to be finalized. For the latest information and updates from Mr. Rohit Dhankar, the Director of Digantar, please visit <http://digantar.blogspot.com> –Editor]

Universalizing primary education may be a major goal of the Government policy makers. But the Jaipur Development Authority (JDA) curiously seems unaware of this. It has issued a notice to demolish a school providing free education to poor and deprived kids for the past 12 years. The school is located in Bandhyali, a village 20 kms from Jaipur, where land prices have tripled in the past one year. The primary school, established in 1992, with financial support from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, has been providing education to over 300 children, mostly girls from very poor and backward families (in Kho Nagoriyan and Bhavgarh Bandhya villages) since 1993. All of the children are

from educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged sections of society such as Malis, Muslims and Gujjars.

Digantar, the voluntary organization that runs the Bandhyali and other neighboring schools, is known nationally for its innovative curriculum and pedagogy and is visited annually by a large number of educationists, teachers and voluntary organizations. Digantar has been working since 1978 in the field of education and its areas of work include framing of curriculum, alternative pedagogy for elementary education and teachers' development. It has contributed to several innovative national endeavors including Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, the alternative schools of the Rajiv Gandhi Siksha Mission in Madhya Pradesh, and textbook development of NCERT.

However, in a blatant violation of the Fundamental Right to "free and compulsory education" granted to every child in the age group of 6-14 years under Article 21A, the JDA issued a notice to Digantar in December asking them to vacate the land. It seems that JDA has unilaterally reserved this land for allotment to "Mahima Shiksha Samiti" for setting up a private university. With the JDA ordering the school to be demolished, students are deeply concerned about their future.

"I want to become a doctor but if this school shuts down I don't know where I will study. My parents will not send me to any other school as they trust only this one. If it closes I will

remain uneducated," said a student. Another student said, "I am scared because my parents will not send me to any other school. My elder brothers and sisters have all studied here. All other schools are very far."

As Rohit Dhankar, the Director of Digantar, points out, "It is not a question of one small school closing down. It is a question of children in this country receiving their fundamental rights to education. If this school shuts down, these children will have to stay at home. They have nowhere else to go." For Bandhyali villagers and Digantar, the land per se is not important. What is critically important is that the school continues, so that children have access to meaningful education. For JDA, however, this land seems important only as a commercial resource.

In the wake of tremendous public mobilization against this notice, Digantar, with the help of the community and various NGOs and concerned citizens moved the Hon'ble High Court of Rajasthan and got a stay order directing the JDA to first consider its long-pending application for allotment of land. Your help is needed to ensure that Bandhyali School is not sacrificed to a unilateral decision of the JDA to promote privatization of education at the cost of free primary education for minority children. For more information and the latest developments, please visit <http://digantar.blogspot.com>.

BIKERS OF GREATER SEATTLE UNITE!

The Seattle to Portland biking event (STP) unfolds this year on July 15-16. Participants experience the unique challenge of cycling cross-country, while raising funds for the needy children in India. It is a true opportunity for tremendous personal accomplishment and a tangible contribution to a just cause. Bikers have successfully completed the STP in the past couple of years under the banner of Asha. So, this year, too, we request you to take up the challenge on behalf of Asha and make the "Wheels of Change" move ahead.

For more info, contact rajih@microsoft.com
or ashaseattlebikers@yahoo.com



Learning to AID: Choices, choices & choices

Sunil Laxman

[This article is in continuation of a previous article appearing in the January '06 issue of Asha Kiran (Learning to AID). Here, Sunil ends his discussion about Ravi Kuchimanchi's (the founder of AID) focus on efforts at finding indigenous solutions to existing problems. Without brandishing the so-called fire-brand radicalism, Ravi exhorted the affected people to find practical and contextually relevant solutions to everyday problems.

This is an article in three parts describing Ravi's grassroots experience and discussing the ramification. Here Ravi throws a hypothetical situation at the audience and asks for plausible solutions. This is an altogether very familiar situation that many, in urban as well as rural settings, have faced: corruption being the primary obstacle to basic progress. This discussion will make us aware that in actual situations, we have many choices to take recourse to - some ethical while some bordering on the grey areas- however, the solution does not seem clear. Do you condone the corruption and let it persist while getting your job done or do you resist but eventually make it tougher for your community to avail of basic amenities? As Sunil commented, "There clearly are no right or wrong answers – just choices".

This originally appeared as a blog entry by Asha volunteer Sunil Laxman following Ravi's talk at Seattle (<http://balancinglife.blogspot.com/2005/08/learning-to-aid-iii-choices-choices.html>). Please post your comments and queries on Sunil's blog.] -Editor

Let's take the example of a village with around 200 houses. 150 of them don't have electricity, though the village is officially "electrified". You investigate, and find out from the villagers that the only way to obtain an electricity connection would be to pay a fairly large bribe, say some 1500 rupees. This may not seem too exorbitant, but we're talking about very poor villagers, who spend about 40 rupees per month on kerosene for their lanterns. Many of them want electricity so that they can have a couple of light bulbs at home, their kids can stay back and study in the evenings, and perhaps they can afford a fan to use in the summer months. Seems very basic, but this small change means a lot to them. And they cannot afford to pay the bribe, and remain powerless (pardon the pun). The situation was thrown open to us, and we were asked for possible solutions. Here are some that were voiced.

1) Try to unite the poor villagers, and force the local authorities to provide the villagers these basic services by taking legal action against them.

Problems with this scenario: This would certainly be a long and difficult struggle. If you as an outsider were doing this, you will have to remain in this village for a long time (probably years) to see this fight through. Secondly, the villagers might have to undergo a lot of other hardships (repercussions) if they start these demands. Thirdly, it is difficult to keep a group already with difficulties to stay united. Legal disputes take a long time for resolution in court (years sometimes), and can be very expensive. Who will bear the expense for that many years? Who will ensure the implementation of the court verdict?

2) We know that such corruption exists. But there is some validity of strength in numbers. So, couldn't the villagers unite, and then say that though they can't pay the huge bribe, they will together pool a smaller (but still large, because of scale up) amount each, and give this in bulk. Sort of like a Costco or Sam's club bulk rate pricing, a discounted rate of corruption (yes, a couple of us came up with this idea!)

Problems with this scenario: Come on, if an ethical battle is being fought, you have to take a correct stand. This would absolutely condone corruption. Additionally, it may or may not work, but will make any future in the progress next to impossible.

3) As an NGO, promote alternate energy sources, such as solar or biogas, which can be used in place of electricity.

Problems with this scenario: This one can be viable, but only in certain cases. The costs of solar lighting etc are much higher than conventional electricity sources, and require a lot of funding. It is cheaper for say, solar cookers, but solar lighting is another proposition all together. With biogas etc, it's not enough to have cattle, but there should be a certain number of cattle, as well as sufficient quantities of water to spare. Again, cost factors are fairly high (to build a distribution system etc). However, some groups, like the Barefoot college have managed to solve some problems with this approach. Still, it is difficult for small groups to do this in a large number of villages. Implementation requires a huge grassroots base, which most groups don't have.

4) Look for sincere officials to help combat these problems. After all, all government

officials can't be bad.

Problems with this scenario: It is absolutely true that there are good government and administrative officials, who are not corrupt and work sincerely. However, they are not the rule, and a large section of the officials are not in this category. Often, the good ones are themselves powerless given their surroundings (if say there is a good middle level official, but the immediate superior is corrupt, the good official is unable to act. Sometimes, a junior official who is corrupt might be politically or locally very powerful, and the senior official can't go against him/her). But it certainly is a good idea to find these officials, and take their help whenever possible. However, in, say the situation above, this alone will not provide a solution.

5) Gather some villagers, surround (in this case) the linesman and ask him why he accepts bribes (say at a panchayat meeting). Try to publicly question him, and hope that yields results.

Problems with this scenario: Usually, the lowest official will claim that he's being paid too little. Then the villagers will clamor that this is not true, and reveal his (usually rather adequate) salary. He'll backtrack, and then say that his share of the bribe is only 50 rupees, the rest go to superiors. So he might magnanimously forfeit his share. But this gets more and more difficult as you go up the ladder (to say a senior engineer, whose cut is actually hefty). Still, there are merits in this suggestion as well.

6) How about negotiating a settlement with the officials, with a request that they at least consider requests from the poorest applicants without demanding bribes. The list would be provided to the officials by an impartial external group (say the NGO), with the guarantee that each person in the list is too poor to possibly pay the bribe. This person could then be awarded a connection. The carrot to the government officials in this case would be a guarantee not to go to the press, or press charges.

Problems with this scenario: Even if the officials agree to this (due to your constant pressure), they might take a very long time to execute this/clear the files. Additionally, would it not be unfair to the others, who, though they can possibly afford the bribe, should by right not have to pay it. Where do you draw the line? Here you are not really condoning corruption, but you are drawing some line to start your fight. However, it is a possibly viable stance.