



Asha Kiran

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Greetings Friends,

This edition of the newsletter features an article on the Right to Information bill – considered one of the most progressive bills ever passed in post-Independent India. Immediately after it came into effect, citizens of India have enthusiastically used this Act as a tool to check widespread corruption, fight injustice and make our governments more transparent. For the first time, it has empowered people to say no to bribes and get their day-to-day work done without harassment. Right to Information is recognized as a fundamental right by United Nations and most countries have acts to this effect. However, in spite of the immediate success of this bill, the Government of India has taken a retrogressive action to amend this bill, which makes this Act almost ineffective. This article talks about the basic provisions of this bill, some success stories and more details on the amendment.

One of the efforts of Asha Seattle has been to develop long-term relationships with our partner groups in India. One of our first projects was Champa Mahila Society (CMS) in the remote Sunderban areas of West Bengal. We have been working with them since 1994 and have witnessed the impact this group has had – not only in the area of education, but in terms of health conditions, women's empowerment and overall development of that area. One of our volunteers, Aparajita, visited this group earlier this year and she shares her experiences on one of the schools supported by this group in our article: I dream – a childhood filled with laughter.

As the year is drawing closer to the end, our last major event of the year is coming up – “Miles for Smiles” – Asha team participating in Seattle Marathon. Asha Seattle's marathon training program provides the necessary coaching and support system for both experienced and beginner runners. Most of our runners are first timers. The runners need your support to complete this physically grueling task of running 26.2 miles (for full marathon). Most of them have been practicing hard for the last few months and your encouragement will definitely help them finish the course with enthusiasm – knowing that their efforts have paid off. You can look at their profiles at: <http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/events/marathon>. This year we are also the official partner of Seattle Marathon and will be managing a water booth on the event day.

On closing, we would like to hear your feedback on our work and the newsletter. Let us know how we are doing, what you want to hear about and if you would like to see something change. We value your comments and would love to hear from you. You can send us a mail at seattle@ashanet.org or call us at 425 890 8515. You can also join us for our meetings – the schedule is at the back of this newsletter as well as online on our chapter webpage.

Thank you,
The Asha Seattle Team.

I dream – A Childhood Filled with Laughter

Champa Mahila Society (CMS) is an NGO working towards creating a self-reliant community and develop a feeling of cooperation with focus on women's groups. They are established in the Basanti area of Sunderban in West Bengal. They work in education (for younger and older children), health (both preventive and curative), Self Help Groups (SHG) promoting micro-credit, kitchen garden and animal husbandry.



The school was a pleasant sight in this remote island with whitewashed walls, decorated artistically with beautiful alpana (rangoli). There were two rooms really; each maybe around 8X10 feet and it held classes from

primary till class six. The kids who came here were from the poorest of the poor families, whose parents survived on fishery and labor at the fields. The smallest of them all, the toddlers, who tagged along with their elder siblings to school, sat in rows in the verandah outside the classrooms. They left their chalk, slates and picture books and looked up at me, wide eyed.

Two classes were being held in the first room, kids of each class facing opposite walls. Needless to say the room was crammed with 60-70 kids. With a blackboard on the wall, a dedicated teacher tried to command attention to the lesson. How can these kids learn in this environment, I wondered? If I was amazed at the first classroom, the other room had more in store for me. Three classes were being held here; easily some 100 kids. When I started talking to kids, asking them questions on various subjects, the kids were bubbling with energy to show off their knowledge and skills. Each one wanted to recite a poem, sing a song, tell a story, solve a problem on the blackboard, and so on...

Even with minimum resources and no support from family or anyone else, these kids were so brilliant on their own! I knew that given the opportunity, there will be no limit to what these kids can achieve in life. I headed out to the clearing in front of the school where the kids played. Outside a class of rhymes/songs was on in full swing. The children stood in a circle with their arms folded.



One of them, the leader, would recite a line, and everyone else would

repeat after him/her. All the rhymes/songs taught something, it may simply be counting up to 10 by wriggling their fingers and toes. The children enacted while reciting as loudly as they could. It was evident they loved this class. They giggled, laughed and playfully jostled with each other. The teacher asked a small shy kid, Sonai, to lead. She told me that he was the best. That he was so bright he knew all the poems and songs but he had no strength in his voice. As the skinny, barefooted kid lead the group I saw no expression on his face. I was told that his father had become a victim of the lords of Sundarban jungle, the tigers. His mother had three more kids to support. So she left him with his granny and went to Delhi to work. Often the meal he got from school was the only meal of the day for him. I took Sonai aside to talk to him but he answered in syllables and nods. Attempts to bring a smile on his face failed; his eyes were dead. At this tender age of maybe five or six years, he had already seen the worst of life.

As my heart filled with a deep unknown sorrow, I tried to fight my tears. I wondered about Asha, about how what we do makes a difference in the life of kids like Sonai. Asha brings light, hope, joy to thousands of kids in India. But it still remains a drop in the ocean. We need so much more from people like me in the privileged land to create a world where kids like Sonai can have a childhood filled with laughter.

Right to Know: Information for Public

[Many of the material for this article have been taken from various news papers, Asha and AID websites and government of India websites.]

How many times have we sat in front of a computer browsing the internet and wondered at the amount of information out there for everyone – well, everyone with an access to internet. If used prudently, information is a great resource, very much so for a democratic system making participatory democracy meaningful. It can be a means to realize the full range of people's human rights. According to the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) Right to Information is considered a fundamental human right: "The practice of routinely holding information away from the public creates 'subjects' rather than 'citizens' and is a violation of their rights". This was recognized by the United Nations at its very inception in 1946 when the General Assembly resolved: "Freedom of Information is a fundamental human right and the touchstone for all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated". Right to Information gives citizens the legal power to attack the legal and institutional impediments to openness and accountability that still dominate the operations of many governments.

In 2005 Right to Information (RTI) act was passed in Indian Parliament and it is regarded as one of the most progressive laws passed in independent India. This act gives citizen the right to get information on any government decisions including how the decision was reached at and which officials played what part in arriving at a decision. A citizen can now inspect or get copies of any government documents. This act is seen as one of the major players in fighting against the malaise of corruption in India. In Studies by Berlin based Transparency International India has secured a lowly rank of 88, out of 159 countries surveyed, of the most corrupt places on earth. One or more existing officers in every

government department have been designated as Public Information Officers (PIO). In addition, many officers have also been appointed as Assistant Public Information Officers (APIO). PIOs and APIOs are the contact for the citizens to file applications. There are some nominal fees associated with filing an application and that varies by state. Time limit is one important aspect of this Act – any information sought has to be made available within 30 or 35 days - depending on whether it was filed with a PIO or with an APIO.

RTI at Work

The simple act of demanding to know the status of one's grievance petition and the names of the officials who have been sitting on the files does wonders. Almost 200 people got their individual grievances resolved within a matter of few days of filing applications under RTI Act. Grievances of a number of these people were pending for the past several years for expectations of bribes. People got new electricity connections, faulty meters were replaced, and wrong bills were rectified. RTI did wonders for all these people. Similarly, people could get their work done in many other government departments without paying bribes. Ration cards were made, faulty water bills were rectified, old age pensions were restored and many other works were done as soon as the people filed applications to know the status of their applications and the names of the officials who were sitting on their files.

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One of the major victories of RTI was exposing the flawed water privatization deal in Delhi. Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) got a consultancy contract from Delhi Government. Parivartan, a voluntary organization, obtained File notings under Delhi Right to Information Act and that revealed that PWC was at 10th position. In fact, it did not even qualify in the preliminary round. File notings revealed how World Bank pressurized Delhi Government to bring up PWC, cancel bids, do rebidding, change selection criteria etc till such time as PWC got the contract. File notings also revealed how some honest officers protested but their protests were not accepted.

Another success story was exposing Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) decision to raze 150 jhuggis in Mayur Vihar, Delhi. DDA said no land was available to resettle them. File notings revealed that 700 plots of land had actually been developed by DDA in Kondli for resettling them.

Asha Lalpur Ashram (One of Asha initiatives in India) have been engaging the community and carrying out interventions through Right to Information and other means. Another partner group of Asha, Parivartan, has also been working in this area. They have helped individuals and the community in numerous cases to fight for their rights.

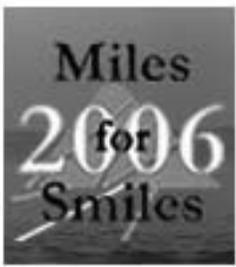
Like everything else, a great Act like this can also be misused or not taken seriously. There have been cases where the information sought was not handed over in time and people had to go to the next levels. The UP state government had not appointed Chief Information Commissioner and Information Commissioners showing lack of interest in implementing the Act. Sometimes it is difficult for individuals to know what application to fill and whom to handover. However, despite few incidents like this, the RTI Act has brought a lot of enthusiasm in public and a great tool for a democratic system. It is taking the shape of a mass movement.

RTI Amendment

Less than one year after the bill was passed, the central government came up with an amendment to the RTI Act to exempt notings made by officials on files (known as file notings) related to all areas except social and development sector projects from the purview of the Act. Government files have two halves – one is the main correspondence and materials. The other is the closely held note sheet which records how a proposition has been examined, views, advice and recommendations made by the concerned officers. As the file moves up the hierarchy, at each stage some notes are added and signed. Thus file notings reflect the mind of the government, bares the intention of an individual officer and whether his/her advice and consent were grounded on established rules. This amendment makes it almost impossible to trace the guilty officials and will provide no clue as to how a decision was made – thus effectively making the Act an ineffective tool.

This amendment has alarmed many individuals and groups who were looking forward to using this Act to force change in our bureaucratic system. Many organizations in India have staged protests, organized rallies, hunger strikes, sit-ins etc. Outside India groups like Asha and AID have organized protests, awareness drives, and signature campaigns and also partnered with groups working in this area supporting their campaigns. The government finally bowed to the public pressure and have decided not to pass the amendment for now. However, the struggle is not over. We have to be ever vigilant and make sure such retrogressive steps are not taken in the future.

[** for anyone interested, the full Act in Hindi and English is available at the website of Department of Personnel and Training <http://www.persmin.nic.in>.]



“Asha Seattle’s Miles for Smiles 2006 team will participate in the Seattle Marathon and Half Marathon on November 26th. Wish them all the best!”

Please visit: <http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/events/marathon/>