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FOR MORE INFORMATION

All are welcome to join us at our bi-monthly meetings. For information, please go to www.ashanet.org/seattle/resources/meetings/

April 11 - 7:30 PM - RTC/LWSD No. 414,
Morton Johnson Room

April 22 - 2 PM - Redmond Regional Library

For specific requests and queries, please contact us at

Email: **seattle@ashanet.org**

Phone: **425 890 8515**

Donations are welcome, and will go a long way in changing many lives in India.

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ASHA KIRAN

Asha-Seattle's quarterly Newsletter

VOLUME 13 - ISSUE 2 APRIL 2007



Bhoomi Heen Sewa Samithi: Amazing Persistence and Courage

Jayashree Janardhan

We have some great news from Aau, a little village in Uttar Pradesh (UP) where Bhoomi Heen Sewa Samithi runs a school. Aau is a village with a strong existing feudal system. The village's Dalits live extremely difficult lives, in very sparse and poor conditions. The entire effort is a victory based on a single man, Lalit-ji's (Lalit Uniyal) courage and commitment in an area of great social inequities. His persistent use of the legal system in the state of UP has finally paid off after 19 years of struggle. Asha Seattle has been supporting Bhoomi Heen for many years now and chapters, Asha wide, supported Bhoomi Heen during WAH 1998.

In Lalit-ji's own words - here is what happened:

"The great news is that we have won a land ceiling case against the biggest landlord of Aau. I had to pursue this matter in the High Court for about 19 years! The result is that 191 bighas of land will now be released for distribution among landless Dalit laborers. My estimate is that no one will remain totally landless in Aau. Everyone will hold at least a small plot. And the insane domination of the village by one family will end forever.

You may recall that I have often spoken of being engaged in a fight against feudalism. Well, this legal victory constitutes the single most powerful blow to the feudal structure in Aau village. It will unquestionably make a huge difference to life in our village. I hope and expect that the tasks for the future will be largely constructive and educational. (Of course the general environment outside Aau will not change along with the expected changes in Aau, so the element of difficulty and struggle cannot be eliminated altogether.)

Also, there is a lot of territory still to be covered. To start with, the landlord can appeal in the Supreme Court. But my lawyer friends are confident that he will not get any relief from the SC. Then, there is the problem of implementation. There is so much corruption: one can expect attempts to distort the distribution to favor those who already possess land. It will be a prolonged process, and I may need to devote some attention to that too. But if all comes through without too much corruption the consequences will be huge, and for all time."

Lalit-ji has shown insane courage - to take on a feudal system and step by step bring empowerment to the poor in one of the most violent districts in Banda, UP. He has faced many threats against his life in addition to many false charges to try and stop his work. This victory has been the effect of a single man's persistence against all odds; an often lonely and prolonged persistent battle. He deserves all the support he can get to take on the next phase of his work.

If you can take the time, please write to Lalitji and congratulate him. His email address is ulalit@sancharnet.in.

Greetings,

Spring is a time of rejoice and renewal. This spring, we celebrate the joy of one man, Lalit Uniyal, who single handedly won a 19-year legal battle in Uttar Pradesh just so Dalits in the village of Aau (where Bhoomi Heen Sewa Samithi runs a school) could exercise the right to own land.

In this edition, we present an Asha project, Muskaan. Deborah, a fellow Asha volunteer, writes about her visit to Muskaan and its work with families in the slums of Bhopal. Spring symbolizes creativity; epitomizes inspiration like Kalam: Margins Write, a project which works with the marginalized youth of Calcutta to find their voices in creative writing.

We'd love hear your thoughts on Asha-Seattle's quarterly newsletter. Let us know what you like, what you dislike, and the articles you want featured. Drop us a line at: seattle@ashanet.org or call us at: 425-890-8515.

Happy Spring!

The 2007 Asha Seattle Editorial Team

UPCOMING:

Wheels of Change

July 14 - 15, 2007

16th Annual Asha Wide Conference

May 26 - 28, 2007

Conference in New Jersey will feature two keynote speakers, Vinod Raina of AIPSN and Mr. E.S. Ramamurthy of Sikshana.

5th Annual Learning Network Conference

July 20 - 22, 2007

Bangalore, India

Muskaan - A volunteer's perspective

Deborah Kukreja, Asha volunteer

S shrieks of joy penetrated the air as feet darted in and out of a lovingly worn concrete building. A rhythmic clap of hands halted the short impromptu recess as children filtered in. They plopped down on heavy white tarps, readying themselves for study. One group pulled out writing notebooks; a second group worked on math problems, while a third group practiced Hindi by writing about life in their communities. This could be any ordinary school in India, but this is the teaching center of Muskaan and it sits on the periphery of a slum area in Bhopal.

Under the vision of Shivani Taneja, Muskaan, meaning "Smile" in Hindi, started in 1997 as an effort to provide meaningful education to twenty children from deprived backgrounds in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Daily interactions with the slums where these children lived convinced Muskaan to extend its educational programs and to initiate community and health care initiatives for the children's families. Muskaan works extensively with six slums in Bhopal: Ganganagar, Gautamnagar, Rajeevnagar, Sargam Basti, Bapunagar, and Banjara Basti. Over the last ten years, Muskaan has grown from 20 to 400+ children and their families.

"As a team we have always believed in the inherent capacities of people to take decisions appropriate for themselves; in the people's right to develop and express themselves by accessing opportunities equitably (irrespective of caste, class, sex) and to attain an optimal quality of life. Our role lies in providing an environment whereby people and particularly children have opportunities for enhancing themselves, and confidence to access these opportunities," says Shivani Taneja,

Inspiring children to learn is difficult by any standard; it is momentous when past experiences in the government education system fraught with harassment, exhaustion from working, and lack of education-going peers, dissuade children from pursuing an education. Yet, at Muskaan's teaching center, some 240 children study five days a week between 9:30 AM and 2 PM. And of 240 children, 100 consistently study at the teaching center each week. The youngest children attend Baldwadis (preschools), four of which operate within the slums.

Virtually every child works two to six hours per day, either rag picking or watching over younger siblings while their parent(s) rag pick. Many families are understandably reluctant in sending their children to school when every rupee earned is barely enough to survive. Early on, Muskaan realized the significance of involving families in the children's education. If families saw the long-term value of education, then children would be more likely to attend school.

With this, Muskaan started a Women's Savings Group to encourage financial independence while providing a strong emotional support system. Most of the slums have a women's savings group. Facilitated by Muskaan staff, women record the date along with the amount of money saved in their individual ledgers. Conversations of work, life, and family abound as money is pooled for a collective savings box. The women collectively decide how the money will be used. Money typically goes toward food, medical expenses (particularly for childbirth), and in one savings group, pooja.

Prior to the savings groups, women relied heavily on outside lenders with interest rates as high as 20%. The savings groups have decreased outside debts while increasing lending amongst the women for very little – 1% – to no interest rate. Self-confidence in fiscal responsibility has grown considerably since the inception of the groups. In addition, the groups provide a forum to discuss life and its daily challenges.

Yet, health is one of the big challenges families face living in the slums. Limited amounts of unsanitary water coupled with squalor living conditions lend themselves to diarrhea, pneumonia, and colds—the most common illnesses. It is not atypical for a baby to die every two to three months

shortly after delivery within the slums. Sadly, a baby's death is accepted as a normal part of life.

Over time, Muskaan has been able to convince women of the importance in immunizing their children. Muskaan escorts the women and children from each slum to a public dispensary one time per month for vaccinations. In the past, women have been uncomfortable traveling to the dispensary alone for fear of harassment. In two of the slums, women



(Cont. on pg3)

Past Happenings 2006-2007

Miles for Smiles – November 2006

On November 27, 2006, 36 people ran in quest for creating positive change for about 300 lives. Together, they cruised 579.60 miles to bring thousands of more smiles to the underprivileged of Indian society

Asha Seattle Workshop—February 2007

Winter's workshop featured an in-depth look into Muskaan (also featured in this quarter's newsletter), an open discussion on project metrics, and improvements on the process.

Geetanjali—March 2007

The 4th annual music concert successfully raised money for Senchiamma School (Tamil Nadu) and the Sharada School, part of the Champa Mahila Society (West Bengal)

Asha Seattle Presents "It's my right – It's my fight" Talk—December 2006

A Right to Information talk by Arvind Kajriwal - Magsaysay award winner for emergent leadership in 2006'

Bhopalis 15 day hunger strike ends as State Government agrees to key demands—March 2007

An eventful and successful hunger strike demanded that the state government keep and implement the promises made in 2006.

Documentary Film Screening "Farmer Suicide in Vidarbha"—January 2007

This was a 90-minute movie screening with Q & A with Film Maker Suma Josson

MILES FOR SMILES 2007

Updates

We are pleased to announce a partnership with the Seattle Marathon Association (SMA), thanks to Rohit's efforts. As its official partner, Asha-Seattle is now represented on advertising material and SMA's website. This is a mutually beneficial alliance increasing awareness about Asha and SMA within the local community.

Additionally, the Miles for Smiles team is now ready to recruit and begin the marathon-training program. Pass the word along to your friends and co-workers.

We can be reached at: AshaMiles4Smiles07@yahoo.com.

Our goal: 50 runners; total target fundraising: \$50K.

2007 team members: Amit, Amol, Megha, Neha, Palani, Pavan, and Subhasish.



**Bikers of
Greater Seattle
UNITE!**

**The Seattle to Portland biking
event (STP) unfolds this year
on July 14-15 2007.**

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

remember their children's vaccination schedules and are now confident enough to travel by themselves to the dispensary.

As children grow older, it is increasingly important to foster a nourishing educational environment. Two years ago, Muskaan started a hostel as a place for older girls to live peacefully while focusing intently on their studies. Prior to the hostel, arguments frequently erupted at home about prospective husbands for the girls. Their parents want marriage; the girls want education. The girls aim high; their eyes wide with hope and thirst for knowledge. During my visit to Muskaan in December 2005, I had the opportunity to chat with some of the girls, girls with wonderful aspirations. One student dreamed of being a biologist, another one, a physician.

This year, three of Muskaan's girls are in the 11th standard; three more are in 10th. They are the first of Muskaan's children to reach these heights. Their eyes soar the skies. Other children will soon follow.

Indeed, Muskaan inspires ambitions of life and livelihood beyond the constructs of the slums.

Due to limited space, this article highlights only some of Muskaan's programs. For more detailed information of Muskaan's activities, please visit www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=267



Did you know...?

- China will soon become the number 1 English speaking country in the world?
- We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist?
- There are about 540,000 words in the English Language
- Chess or Shatranj was invented in India?
- Art of navigation was born in the river Sindh 6000 years ago?
- Sushratha is the father of surgery
- Zero was invented by Aryabhatta
- Panini, the sanskrit grammarian, was the first to compose formal grammar through his Astadhyai

Kalam: Margins Write

Initiated in 2004, Kalam Margins Write (KMW) builds a culture of creative writing among the teenagers and youth from Calcutta's slums, red light areas, railway platforms, and shelter homes. From Writing Out: A Poetry Workshop Series and Kholā Baksho: Youth Literary Journal, to Writers' Dialogues, KMW strives to build a culture of confidence and creative voices that brings out the best in the marginalized youth of Calcutta.

In February of this year, Sahar Romani, came to an Asha meeting to showcase her brainchild -Kalam: Margin's Write. Impassioned, devoted, and articulate, Sahar, the program's coordinator and current University of Washington graduate student, shared with us the immense writing creativity that Kalam's children possess. Here, we feature the work of two young and very talented poets of Calcutta.

The Full Moon Night

A full moon night
I sit on the terrace
Moonbeams spread around
No one with me
I count the stars
And, think to myself
Maybe I could be bright like the moon, too,
And brighten the whole city.

*Gopal Paswan runs a fish shop in Kalighat bazaar.
Originally written in Hindi.*

Identity

One day I went to Calcutta city.
Suddenly a guy asked me
"Hey kid, who are you?"
Then I told him
"I'm a poet."
The guy said, "But you sweep train floors"
I said, "I do sweep floors,
But on my own, I've become a poet."

*Bijoy Das lives and works on Malda Railway Junction.
Originally written in Bangla.*

For more info, visit www.kalamarginswrite.org
Contact Sahar: sahar.romani@gmail.com

Mr. India's Dilemma

Saurabh Madan, Asha volunteer

The head hunters at NASA Seattle were blown away by

Mr. India's experience with Mogambo's missiles. With Sridevi and the kids in tow, Mr. India moves to Seattle, to head NASA's QA department. He starts shopping at Indian stores, joins Seattle Indian mailing lists and begins reading Indian newspapers online, in an attempt to stay connected to India. All the while, a constant thought lingers in his mind – "What can, I, Mr. India next do for India?"

Indeed, he is no stranger to India's problems: religious strife, female foeticide, bureaucracy, et al; but its contrast with his new frame of reference hits him with unparalleled force. One day, as he watched the sunset from his balcony overlooking the Rainier Mountains, he tears open his shirt (superman style), and declares, that he, Mr. India, with his dad's formulae and superhero powers would bring about India's redemption.

But what should he do? Where should he start? AIDS is endemic, farmers are dying, 50 million Indian kids have not yet seen the school walls, militia movements are thriving, and criminals are ruling the country. Kicking Mogambo's 'butt' - was definitely not enough! His head reeling and heart thumping Mr. India runs inside the house and asks Sridevi – "Tell me, what must a superhero do?" Sridevi, looking up from the DVD screen, and replies "Mr. India, ask yourself this ... what must a free man do?"

What indeed must a free man do...?

His quest for answers takes Mr. India to a talk organized by Asha Seattle. Attending this talk titled 'Right to Information (RTI) - a Talk by Arvind Kajiwal - Magsaysay award winner for emergent leadership in 2006, Mr. India's eyes open a little. For the first time, he understands the fundamental relationship between flow of information and the just and equitable society. Encouraged, he thereafter attends another talk, this time by an IAS officer, from which learns that all politicians are not evil. Many roads turn out badly simply because we don't have the expertise to build them right. At Jayashree Janardhan's workshop, he learns that a tribal child does not learn from a book that depicts an average home with a TV and a Fridge, because the book does not relate to its culture.

In activist Suma Josson's film he sees an objective analysis of the Green revolution (I am still not convinced it is 100% true) that mainstream media just does not undertake. He realizes how multinationals use local deities as brand ambassadors for their products. He sees that while monocropping destroys India's genetic diversity some people are quietly filing patents to claim ownership of well adapted local varieties. He sees how one-season seeds destroy traditional models of sustainability which prescribe the reuse of seeds season after season. He realizes how expensive fertilizers reduce soil-productivity in the long run and that a gene resistant to American Bollworm does not fight desi Kidas

(aka other local worms).

Talk after talk, discussion after discussion, over and over again, Mr. India forces himself to confront that one bitter truth – "We the people don't understand our own problems..."

But Mr. India also realizes that he just cannot take America's solutions and apply it as is to India's problems. When his friend, the CEO of a multinational company decides to spend Lakhs of Rupees on remodeling the walls of a poor Indian school, Mr. India tells the friend that nutritious food is more important than pretty walls. When another friend decides to construct new schools, he tells the friend that a worthier challenge would be to improve the quality of the existing 900,000 schools rather than constructing more. And although Mr. India has not arrived, he has indeed avoided doing more harm than good, which unfortunately, is exactly what zealous superheroes end up doing, despite good intentions.

But that's Mr. India. Let's talk about me. I am no Mr. India ... I have work! Kids! Boss! Spouse! Traffic! ...you name it, I've got it. I don't have the time to attend talks ... and anyway, I pay these Asha folks some cash every year, to remind myself that I do remember India's problems.

True. But far away from Seattle, between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, is a potpourri of races, languages, religions and customs; a place where paradoxes of poverty, riches, renunciation, ambition, hope, dreams and despondency exist together. Some call this mass of land a country. I call it an Ideal ... an ideal called India.

This great ideal does not need your charity. Hell No!! There are more billionaires in Mumbai than there are in New York. What it needs is your awakening.

Wake up! Do something!

Author's note: I chose a male protagonist for convenience only.

Passing thought

It takes a village to raise a child.
(African Proverb)

**The whole art of teaching
is only the art of awakening
the natural curiosity of young
minds for the purpose of
satisfying it afterwards**
(Anatole France)