



ASHA KIRAN

Asha-Seattle's quarterly Newsletter

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Greetings all!

In this edition of Asha Kiran, we share with you a journey of an institution, Timbaktu Collective, in words of Mr. C.K Ganguly, a founder member of the collective. Mr. Ganguly is an activist, visionary and a great speaker with 30 years of experience working for Human Rights of agricultural laborers, marginal peasants, women and children. Timbaktu has helped strengthen the natural resource base in the Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh, on which local people still depend. Today, the Collective brings together people across 130 villages in Anantapur District to address issues of environmental sustainability (reforestation, watershed management), education, women's rights, livelihood generation activities and organic farming.

In our article on Timbaktu we take you through the milestones of the journey, the accomplishments and the road ahead.

In a note on children's education, our photo-feature section features Wagheshwar Vidya Vikas Trust in Wagholi village, Maharashtra. Asha Seattle could help the construction of 10 classrooms, with undisrupted contributions from all of you. Thank you for your whole hearted efforts to spread smiles in to the lives of these children.

We look forward to hear your comments on this edition of the newsletter and suggestions to making it better.

Asha Seattle Team

Nurturing Resources, Nurturing Lives

By Pratibha Bhatia [Asha volunteer]

Timbaktu Collective is an institution active in Ananthpur district in Andhra Pradesh, building ecological and food security for the communities. The collective is committed towards making a lasting improvement in the lives of landless, small and marginal farmers with special emphasis on women, children, youth and Dalits in the area.

Mr. C.K. Ganguly from Timbaktu Collective visited us in June 1st week and we had a chance to hear from him about this project, what Timbaktu Collective does, the journey, milestones, roadblocks and road ahead.

The Timbaktu Collective started in 1990 when a group of young enthusiasts bought a piece of 32 acres in drought prone Ananthpur district of A.P. Today, Timbaktu Collective serves almost 8000 acres of agricultural land. The collective's journey was far from easy – poor soil quality, child labour, low literacy rate, increased violence against women and dalits, and almost zero support from government. Years of farming negligence destroyed common land around the area, traditional artisans and industry.

Today, the Collective works on -

Timbaktu Collective

- **Women Empowerment**
- **Organic Farming**
- **Natural Resource Management**
- **Local Self Governance**
- **Alternative Education**

"Timbaktu is like a laboratory for agricultural experiments. We experiment before going out to the participating Sanghas"

Ecological Restoration and Natural Resource Management:

The Collective started by improving the quality of natural resources around the area by stopping fires, stopping overgrazing and promoting water conservation, and through the years, their efforts have been rewarded in the form of lush green forest, 400 forms of flora and return of many birds and black bucks.

The land: The Collective works with local community groups called Sanghas, whose members are trained and taken care of by collective. These Sanghas treat over 8000 acres of agriculture land. Fostering a partnership with the Forest Protection Committees and Women's Thrift Groups, the Collective and its Sanghas have protected and regenerated forests by preventing fires, overgrazing and tree falling.

The Water: Water is a precious resource for this draught prone area. Historically, Ananthpur once had one of the finest rain harvesting systems in the world. This traditional system used tanks for storing rain water. Built several centuries ago, some of these tanks were now broken, silted and needed attention. The Collective focused on these tanks, reviving them, and creating additional water storage bodies. Today, there are 60 plus water bodies which have remarkably contributed in to:

- Increased water storage for irrigation
- Improvement of ground water recharge
- Revival of open wells and springs
- Availability of drinking water through summer months
- Revival of pisciculture (farming of fish in brackish waters).

Organic Farming: Due to overharvesting of groundnuts in the region, Ananthpur district has suffered from lowered traditional food crop biodiversity and food security. Thus, to encourage the bio-diversity of crops and revival of native crops in the area –crops that survive and thrive and hence are highly suitable to the annual monsoon pattern in this area– the Collective initiated a seed centre for documentation, conservation and popularization of native agro- seeds.

The Collective is now in the process of helping farmers become in-situ seed conversationalists and maintaining and propagating these seed varieties. The farmers who have taken up the cultivation of millets and pulses now notice and recognize that these do far better than groundnuts in times of drought. The collective works with community based organizations to take up this work. The Collective also organizes an annual Environment Day exhibition to display the seed varieties, educate farmers about organic farming, and display the folk art and culture.

Timbaktu Organic is a drive supported by Asha's with collection from WAH. This arm of the Collective has initiated a Producer's co-operative, Dharani Farming and Marketing Cooperative Society Ltd., to help in the economic growth of participating farmers. The cooperative has 890 participating families across 26 villages, covering 2670 acres today. Timbaktu Organic is trying to promote millet, a key native crop of the area, in daily diets of the people, and also runs a restaurant which serves food made from locally grown millet only.

Women Empowerment: The Collective understands that the best way to stop discrimination against women is to make them aware of their situation and help improve their economic status. On this very note, Collective started with a Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Society (MATCS). The participants contribute any amount between Rs. 10 - 30 a month and today 3 MATCS (one in each mandal the Collective operates in) have a net worth of Rs. 40.62 million. The participating women can loan an amount up to Rs. 50,000 to open up a business, buy land or even buy jewellery!

Every group has a system of regular meetings and maintenance

of records and this has enabled them to form federations at the village level and then at the Mandal level. The Mandal level federations have been registered as MATC Societies. Loaning systems, interest rates and all other banking matters have been worked out to the last detail by the members. Extensive training programs have been organized for the Cadre, the leaders of Women's groups and Directors of the Societies in subjects as Book keeping, Literacy, Gender, Eco-restoration, watershed management, Panchayat Raj, etc.

Alternative Education: The children in the regions where the Collective operates are first generation learners and do not have much guidance from their families. The children are left alone with extremely bad schools and unmotivated teachers. As a result of which, the children are neither learning at school nor learning skills from their parents -- basic education that would help sustain their livelihood in the future.

To cope with this situation, the Collective launched The Alternative Education Programme in 1992, by starting a non-formal learning centre called Prakruthi Badi (Nature School) at Chennethapalli. Today this program runs three day schools (Prakruthi Badi, Shyapuram Badi, and Venella Badi), one evening school at Chinnapeta (called Chinna Badi), and one residential school (Timbaktu Badi) in Timbaktu. The number of students has been steadily increasing over the years. In an attempt to share the facilities with children who are part of other schools, they have started a children's resource centre at Chennethapalli which is open to any child from and around the village. The Collective runs 3 Children Resources Centers today making the children in-charge here -- the kids decide what activities they want to indulge into and what type vocational skills they want to learn. All of these children centers are open 365 days a year. Prakruthi Badi remains the central education centre, being the only school of the program with advanced classes up to the equivalent of 10th standard.

In the day schools, a good healthy lunch is provided to the children and a small snack in the afternoon before they go home. In Timbaktu Badi, children get breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The collective has also started a Children Fund for the kids in their institutions. Parents of Timbaktu children contribute Rs. 25/- per month in either cash or the equivalent amount of grains. The grains given are converted into cash. These contributions are put into a children's fund. The money is given back to children when they leave the program to either go for higher studies or for making a living through some economic venture.

Local Self Governance: The Collective realized that the Panchayat Raj system, a local self governance system in India, lacks meaningful participation by the elected representatives, especially women, Dalits and backward classes. In spite of the 73rd amendment in the Indian Judicial system, they have not been able to exercise their powers due to generations of

subjugation. Many elected representatives are unaware of their duties.

The Collective started project titled NGO initiative to get Panchayati Raj Institutions moving in Chennekothapalli and Roddam mandals in 2000. The focus of this project has been to create awareness among the people about the effective functioning of grass root level democratic bodies. The focal activity of this project is conducting training programs for members of Panchayat Raj Institutions with special emphasis on the marginalized people. The Collective also took the initiative in conducting district level Sarpanch training programs as requested by the District Collector. The collective organizes People's Forum meetings so that newly elected representatives meet the general public.

The impact of this work includes:

- Awareness of the Panchayati Raj Act
- Recognition of the role of voters

- Strengthening women and Dalits
- Wider avenues for CBO leaders
- Promotion of election in place of consensus

Apart from these initiatives the Collective is also involved with programs to organize and mobilize rural youth to take part in village development. The Collective also conducts theoretical and cultural activities for the youth in the area. The Collective also runs an institution for disables called Militha (means inclusion in English).

Timbaktu Collective welcomes participation and contribution from outside and you too can participate in the Collective's activities. For more information on Timbaktu please visit www.timbaktu.org or email at info@timbaktu.org. Please visit <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=204> to for more details on this project.

Building Educational Blocks

by: Kavita Sharma, [Asha Seattle Volunteer and Project Steward]

Wagheshwar Vidya Vikas Trust was founded to bring adequate educational facilities in and around Wagholi village, near Pune, Maharashtra, with a vision of making available good education to boys and girls from poor rural families in the community. Asha Seattle Pledged to support for building 10 classrooms for this school in 2008. This photo feature brings a few visions of what a day in school looks like for 2500 children in and around the Wagholi village.

Please visit <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=799> for more details on this project.



Past

E V E N T S

Upcoming

Talks by Dr. Balaji Sampath in association with AID, Seattle - May 21st
Creative Visions for the Future of Learning by Jane Sahi - May 17th
Sustainable Development for a Living: A talk by C.K.Ganguly - June 2nd
Rock n Roll Marathon - June 27th
Asha Booth at Kirkland Performing Centre - through April 09

Wheels of Change - July 11th & 12th
Asha WAH (work-an-hour)
July 15 thru September 15