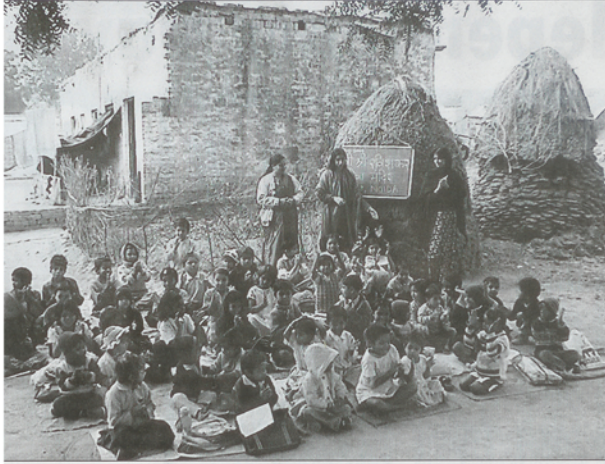


On Independence Day

An Independence Day Special:**From Berkeley to India: The Evolution of Asha**

Educating underprivileged children in India was the impetus for Asha for Education.

by SANDEEP PANDEY
Special to India-West

Asha began at the University

of California campus as an action group for basic education for underprivileged children of India. It was founded in Berkeley, Calif.,

in 1991 in the hope that it would remain a modest group focused on supporting small initiatives in the field of education for underprivi-

leged children.

A book published the same year from MIT, "The Child and the State in India," by Myron Weiner, pretty much concretized the agenda for Asha. This book informed us that about half the children in India didn't go to school and half of these couldn't do so because they were child laborers. The philanthropic Indian and second generation Indian students on campus desired to raise money so that their less privileged counterparts in India could get the same opportunities in life as they got.

About \$10,000 were collected in the first year in which the biggest single contribution was \$200. A large number of people had made small contributions. This laid the foundation of what was to become a large volunteer force committed to educating India's poor children. Soon there were other chapters in different places.

The group was constituted as an informal one without any definite structure or hierarchy. Hundred percent donations were to be sent to India. Administrative expenses were met from the pockets of volunteers. This ensured that only genuine volunteers became active in Asha.

Asha continued to function under the umbrella of Indians for Collective Action for some time. When it became registered, the suffix "for Education" was added as the name "Asha" was already taken up by another organization.

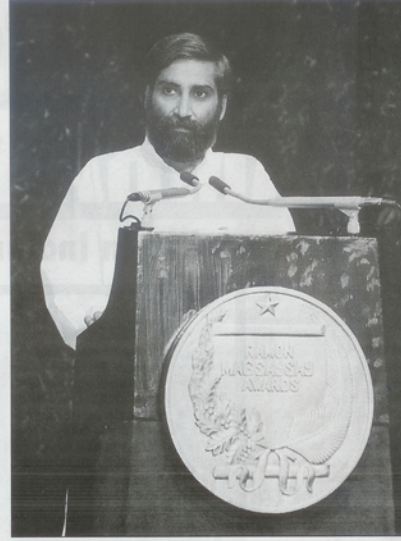
I was the first Asha volunteer to return home and soon became its full time activist. When I started teaching children of Bilaspuri laborers on the IIT Kanpur campus

I realized for the first time that there was an inbuilt bias in our education system. It favored the privileged. No matter how hard the child of a Bilaspuri laborer would study, she would probably never make it to an IIT. The struggle for social, economic and political equality had to be waged first for the vast majority of India's poor before they could even dream of enjoying the benefits of modern development. They continued to live a life of slavery, thanks to India's feudal caste system and the imperial ruling machinery handed over to us by the British. The privileged class in India had completely taken over the administrative machinery and they made sure that the poor were denied the benefits they themselves enjoyed.

I was beginning to agree more and more with this finding of Myron Weiner which I was ready to dismiss upon first reading of his book. A good example is the education system. The elite, including the bureaucrats and teachers in government educational institutions, send their children to hefty fee-charging private schools and the masses are condemned to send their children to substandard government schools. And the elite has ensured that the quality of government schools do not improve.

After leaving my job I worked for some time in Ballia before moving to Hardoi. Asha Ashram was set up in 2000 to be an ideal education center. However, I soon realized that people were interested in more basic issues first. Their priority was to access the benefits due to them from various

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File photo of Sandeep Pandey giving a short speech after receiving the 2002 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership Aug. 31, 2002 in Manila, Philippines. (Getty Images)

From Berkeley to India: The Evolution of Asha

[Cont. from page A12] governmental development and welfare schemes. It dawned upon me that education was my agenda. People wanted their 35 kg of foodgrains as part of the BPL (below the poverty line) category under the Public Distribution System and their house under the Indira Awas Scheme more urgently. After I while we decided that people should set the agenda.

The model of highly educated select volunteers comprising Asha

chapters was replaced in India by rural folks comprising Asha Parivar. It became a people's organization. As it grew in mass base there was an expectation that Asha Parivar would intervene politically. At first it held forums where candidates would respond to pre-listed people's issues and would be asked questions by villagers. Now Asha Parivar fields candidates in elections and is part of a national forum called the People's Political Front. It began to seek information

about income expenditure details of various Gram Panchayats and that of Local Area Development Funds of people's representatives. Blatant corruption was exposed and people's pressure was created on corrupt officials and people's representatives. A slight decrease in corruption meant that benefits from various developmental and welfare schemes started flowing to the people. The most important outcome of this entire exercise was the empowerment of poor

villagers.

Income expenditure details of more than 30 Gram panchayats and 2 block panchayats were obtained. More than 50 fair price shop owners were suspended. The foodgrains of BPL category which were not reaching people at all started flowing. All this had an empowering effect on the people.

Asha Parivar is similarly involved in grassroots intervention in Chandauli-Varanasi, Deoria-Kushinagar, Lucknow-Kanpur in

U.P. and some pockets of Bihar towards empowerment of the marginalized. It continues to be a hope in the lives of thousands if not lakhs of people.

(Sandeep Pandey founded Asha for Education in Berkeley, Calif., in 1992. After getting his Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from UC-Berkeley, he returned to India and after a brief stint of teaching at IIT Kanpur, became a full-time activist. His activist work won him a Magsaysay award.)