

There is hope yet

Last month Dr. Sandeep Pandey won the Magsaysay Award for his work with India's underprivileged. Chindu Sreedharan profiles Asha, the vehicle of his efforts

She had bargained for worse, but not *this*. Vaishali Joglekar, 31, paused to catch her breath at Bangalore airport, where she had arrived after a series of torturous flights.

Eight months ago, when she volunteered to help educate the underprivileged children in India, she had know it would be very demanding. What she hadn't was that it would take three days of flight hopping-sustained by a stubborn sense of purpose, a hard-won, six-month sabbatical from her job, and two huge suitcases-from Boston to reach her destination.

And that was because she was traveling October 4 on the heels of the 9/11 attacks. Direct flights to India stood cancelled; she was rerouted to Los Angeles, Tokyo, Singapore and Chennai before she finally touched base.

Joglekar would do it all over again. In fact, she *is* doing it all over again, in December, though, of course, this time around she hopes she's spared the agony of another marathon voyage.

"The time I spent in India with the children made me aware what I could do for them," she says, a year on. "And how much remains to be done."

Joglekar is not alone in her mission. Across the United States, there are hundreds, thousands addicted to it: education to India's underprivileged.

Like, Jayashree Janardhan, 35. In 1999, she chucked her well-paying job with Microsoft. She now spends extended time in India, working among the poor.

"My job was intellectually stimulating," she says "But what I do now is richer, emotionally. I don't see myself ever stopping it."

Joglekar and Janardhan are part of a huge family-by the name Asha, or Hope, which since its birth in a Berkeley University 10 years ago, has spread across the US, India and Europe.

The beginning, like most beginnings, was austere. A day in May 1991, six or seven Indian students at the University of California, Berkeley, a desire to do something for India's development-thus began Asha.

The next meeting, at a café in Berkeley, was again, poorly attended. The initiator of both efforts was a post-doctoral student, V P J Srivastavoy. Among those present were Sandeep Pandey and Deepak Gupta.

"It was supposed to be a discussion group," says Gupta. "But we decided it would be a focused action group."

And the focus, it emerged after a series of discussions, would be education. Because, the founders felt that was the 'critical requisite' to effect socio-economic change, the cornerstone of development.

Srivastavoy, Pandey and Gupta drafted a preliminary constitution. Next came the question of naming their organization. They knew what it would aim for, but what should they call it?

"Then, one day as Sree (*as Srivastavoy who passed away in May 2000, is known to friends*), Sandeep and I were coming back from San Francisco, we started tossing around names," says Gupta. "We tried Jyoti, Jagrata and ultimately agreed on Asha."

The next months saw Asha pushing itself as a nonprofit organization among students, who, it had been decided, would form its backbone.

The founders hadn't officially registered Asha-that would only happen in 1998-but were functioning under

the aegis of the Indians for Collective Action, a non-profit organization.

“We used to stand on the Stanford University campus distributing flyers,” said Gupta, “but nobody would take them.”

Then they found an option that clicked big time. Email. “It was Richa [*Govil*] who thought that one up,” said Gupta. “She got on the Internet and started mailing people. Soon we had our own newsgroup; people started responding.”

And Asha was on a roll. “At that point, we had no notion we would grow so big,” Gupta said. “But even then we had planned we would be different from other organizations-that we would not have a hierarchy” (see box).

In the meantime, Pandey had returned to India, to teach at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. But a year-and-a-half later, he quit the assignment after, as he puts it, ‘realization dawned that true service to the downtrodden could be rendered only by working physically at the grassroots level’ (*India Abroad*, August 9).

He headed for Lalpur, his paternal grandparent’s village in Uttar Pradesh’s Ballia district. There, in 1993, he set up the first Asha education center. Today, there are three such Asha-run centers, besides a 100-odd supported by it across India.

Asha’s kind of education is ‘non-formal’. The logic, as Pandey explained, being: “Conventional education is only oriented towards jobs, therefore it is based on competition, which in turn gives rise to pride, prejudice and conflict. My idea of education is based on empowerment by imbibing the spirit of cooperation instead of competition.”

In the US, meanwhile, Asha was spreading. By 2002, it was a global organization (www.ashanet.org), 37 chapters strong.

Asha has no ‘members.’ Only volunteers. “And, nobody, not one is paid,” said Netika Raval, in charge of its media relations. “What we do, we do from our heart. Hundred percent of the funds we raise go to our projects.”

Consequently, Asha’s overhead is zero. All expenses-travel, telephone, et al-incurred in the line of volunteerism are paid for by the person concerned.

And this, volunteers said, was a main reason for their joining Asha. “Volunteering for Asha is volunteering in its purest form,” said Ram Tekumalla. “You do it without expecting any returns.”

Then again, there is the significant attraction of ‘human interaction’-unlike in other welfare organizations, a US volunteer is not just limited to fundraising.

“You can actually work on the project, hands-on” said Melli Annamalai. “Because of this model, you learn a lot, you understand issues better, your interest grows, you become part of it.”

Asha’s strategy is simple-raise money, finance projects. The fundraising part, for obvious reasons, mostly happens in the US, across campuses, business houses, through individual contributions, events.

For a sample of Asha’s capability, its efforts saw \$1.2Million being collected in 2001 (a significant part came from individual contributors), \$850,000 of which was used to sponsor educational projects in India.

“Anyone can approach us with a project,” says Janardhan. “We decide on it on the basis of four things-honesty, secularity, sensitiveness to the issue, and site visits.

“We do not fund groups that discriminate, or are religious and non-secular. Likewise, we always visit project sites.”

Asha volunteers are mostly in their 20s and 30s, students and professionals, who, despite their busy schedules, do manage 'Asha work' for an hour or two every day. Ask them how long they will be with Asha and the answer is similar. Which in Joglekar's words is: "As long as Asha is around! Asha is family and you don't desert your family, do you?"

Everyone has a Say, Everyone's voice is heard

It's flat-kept that way deliberately.

"No hierarchy here," says Asha's Bay Area volunteer Netika Raval. "Very consciously, Asha is a decentralized body. Decision-making is a democratic process, by consensus."

A 37-chapter organization without any office-bearers? Well, there are a few, just enough for operational necessities and to please the law of the land.

"For registration and logistics purposes, we need to have some office-bearers," says Raval. "So we have president, treasurer, secretary and directors."

But that, as founder Deepak Gupta points out, is only on paper.

"That was one of our initial decisions. We wanted pure democracy, we wanted coordinators instead of secretary and president."

This structure-rather, the lack of it-was, according to the 10-odd volunteers we spoke to across the US, a major attraction for them.

"Everyone has a say here," says Seattle-based Jayashree Janardhan. "Everyone's voice is heard."

"The lack of status here, it means new people coming in, with new ideas, which we debate and decide upon," she continues. "It means there are no personality clashes-our debates are about issues, not personalities."

Ram Tekumalla of Houston agrees, "There is room for differences in Asha. Like, I don't believe in many things some others may vehemently believe in. But if I have an idea, and I am able to convince the others about it, I can go with it."

The idea is to give volunteers what Raval describes as "the essence of ownership." If you have an interesting idea, or want to form a chapter, you are given a startup kit and guidelines-"and then you run with it."

Thus, you will find each Asha chapter independent yet interconnected through the apex group, Asha Wide, doing their own thing-supporting projects in India, raising funds, et al.

For practical purposes, though, each chapter has a treasurer, a coordinator, who is the point-person, and 'stewards' for projects-all of which, Asha members say, is a way to divide responsibility, not office.

"Who becomes what," says New York-New Jersey chapter's Arun Vadlamani, "depends on who has the time on hand."