

# Asha patrika



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This month:



Independence Day



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## Asha India

### Education - A Vision Beyond Academia

Saswata Basu, Asha Kolkata

“Are you literate?” was the opening question thrown to Nibaran Mondal, a middle aged peasant, by a journalist in a remote village of Nadia district in West Bengal. “No.... and my sons had never gone to schools either!” was the impromptu answer. A few seconds of silence followed and then came the counter question for which the young journo was not prepared “Are you educated?”

“Yes...why?” replied the young lad with a quarter inch frown.

“Not more than me I suppose!!” Nibaran commented with a decent confidence.

“ Yes I know how to grow paddy and sugar cane; I can identify thirty-six varieties of paddy seeds; I had learnt how to use water and manures without affecting the ecological balance; I manage bullocks at the field and cows at home; I can lay thatched roof...and ...”

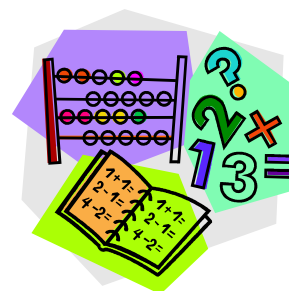
It continued with a few more additions to the diversified knowledge base of Nibaran.

The journalist was a postgraduate student with proficiency in communication skill and photography. His quest to research on the status of education in a remote village incited a new query within himself – Redefining education!!

The schools of thought pioneered by Gandhi, Tagore and later experimented by many like Gijubhai Badheka et al emphasized a decentralized, holistic and life centric learning as the fundamental fibers of education. The regimentation of education, which started, with the inception of modern education system during British colonial rule in India has created a clear social divide in our society for past fifty years after independence. In many cases the current generation shunned traditional activities for a better life through better education, which resulted in making of a disillusioned and frustrated group of socially ostracized lot. Over dependence on schools, examination, teachers and guidebooks had perpetuated a visionless education system in our country. We need schools, books, pencils, blackboard and chalks but not before we know what, whom and how to impart education. Education in post 90s experienced a paradigm shift where ‘much is catered to a few’ and ‘ a few is left for many’. Dollar dreams lured many and education lost its relevance. Education transcended its identity as a basic need to just another lucrative item of commodity.

On behalf of Asha Kolkata once we tried to garner medical support for the grass root NGOs and we approached medical students from various colleges for that. We were surprised to note that most of the students lacked voluntary spirit and were too busy ensuring high marks for their ensuing examinations. An entrant to a medical college qualified Biology, Physics and chemistry papers but is his/her human coefficient evaluated at any point of time? It goes same with engineering, law, management and other formal educational traits with a difference of inch or so. With respect to all the good endeavor that individuals and groups are engaged within Asha and beyond, I personally feel that somewhere the time has come for a serious self-introspection. More than money we need human touch.... more than strategic thought we need feelings, if we really aim to bring socio economic changes through education.

Saswata Basu can be reached at saswata\_77 at yahoo dot com



## **A 15 Year Old Makes a Difference in Millions of Lives**

Prof. Vileen Shah, Chicago



All of us, especially in the U.S. have seen those bumps along with regular print numbers on elevators. Have you ever thought that these tiny dots have changed the world of the blind by opening the doors of learning and a vast ocean of knowledge? A script of six dots lined up in two columns of three each provides 63 braille signs using permutation and combinations. And these six dot variations offer substitutes for print letters, words, numbers, mathematical signs and symbols, music notations and anything else that

sighted persons are able to read and write. Amazing! But more amazing is the story of the inventor of this system of bumps. Louis Braille was just 15 years old when he first developed this system based on raised dots. It is as interesting as fascinating to know how this young boy developed the script of dots for the blind.

Born in 1809, Louis lived with his parents in a small village of Coupvray near Paris in France.

Little Louis was playing with his father's tools in his leather workshop. This three-year old boy did not realize what a pointed awl could do if mistakenly poked into his eyes. The wound infected his

right eye and soon Louis became blind in both eyes. Who could have ever thought that this mishap would bring happiness to the millions of blind all over the world in the future! Louis began to learn at a regular school. Just listening and memorizing lessons at school was not a problem for him but he did miss the crucial part of reading and writing. He started wondering if there could be some system by which blind could also read. To his pleasant surprise, at age 9, he got admission and scholarship at Royal Institution for Blind Youth—a special school in Paris. At this school blind students were taught to read using regular raised print letters. Louis' all enthusiasm was abated when he found that this system of raised letters was clumsy, inconvenient and unpardonably slow. The school had only 14 books that diligent Louis finished reading but not enough! He wanted to explore further world of knowledge and literature.

In 1821 Charles Barbier, a former soldier, visited his school and casually mentioned that in the French army they were using a system of raised dots and dashes to pass on messages to soldiers at night. Could this French soldier have ever imagined that the system of dots used in the darkness of night would become a lighting lamp of literacy for the blind in the years to come? A lightening of thought flashed in the mind of Louis. He thought to himself, "Why not something similar for the blind?" He was only 12 years old.

He picked up the idea of 12 dot-system and started working on it. He realized that 12 dots made on a paper cannot be deciphered by one fingertip. His concern was to develop a system that would enable blind persons to read at a speed. Reducing progressively the number of dots to six, he concluded that he could read one character at a time with

his fingertip. That's it! Louis developed a script of raised dots using permutations and combination of six. The result was 63 signs. He prepared the whole alphabet and punctuation and wrote a sentence. His parents were proud of him when he read out a sentence written in his dot-based script. He was just fifteen!

It is disheartening to know that until his death, Louis Braille's system of dots was not recognized. Many friends used this system for personal communication but official orthodoxy came in the way for its universal recognition.

It was after his death that Royal National Institute for the Blind in London decided to adopt this script for educating the blind and name it braille script. Soon this new way of teaching and making blind literate became universal. Today, millions of blind around the world are considered literate although they cannot read print letters. Thanks to the Braille script and Louis Braille!

In this computer age now, software are developed that can convert electronic files into braille using specially designed printers at the speed ranging from 15 to 400 braille characters per second. Just in the United States, 20 millions of braille pages are produced every year providing textbooks, magazines, journals, and other reading materials of general interest. It is frustrating to note

*He wanted to explore further the world of knowledge and literature*

that barely half a million braille pages are generated every year in India although its blind population is 100 times more than that of the United States. Every effort must be made to promote braille production and braille literacy in India in order to make our blind counterparts productive citizens. Asha for Education should be commended for undertaking this task. So far, Asha has shipped 4 braille embossers (printers) to different organizations for the blind in India. Thanks to Asha Seattle, Asha Stanford, Asha Salt Lake City and other chapters for these stupendous contributions. Asha Colorado deserves special appreciation for its initiative of shipping a braille printer to Sikkim, one of the most undeveloped areas of northeastern India.

One such printer of an average speed (50 CPS [character per second]) along with a braille translation software costs about \$5000. I would like to appeal that more Asha volunteers should come forward to help promote this humanitarian cause. Funds do not have to come from Asha only every time. I, for instance, was instrumental in obtaining funds from Manav Seva Mandeer, Jain Temple of Chicago and Care and Share, a social organization to donate braille printers to some blind schools in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Let's reach all temples and social organizations and request for this one-time donation. Let's come together in large numbers to spread braille literacy all over India. The results will be fabulous! One such machines will generate thousands of braille pages producing hundreds of textbooks and will enable blind students to read materials by themselves with their sighted peers at schools. By 2010, I wish to reach the target of producing nearly 5 million braille pages every year.

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*Vileen Shah can be reached at vileenshah at hotmail dot com / (847) 647-6677*

# Editorial



August is a special month for Asha, with the Asha-wide fund raiser, *Work An Hour* peaking on Indian Independence Day. Every year, as we celebrate the independence, the question arises whether that independence has resulted in freedom of our people.

Nobel laureate Prof. Amartya Sen's work brings the focus of freedom to facets that touch aspects of daily life apart from the politics of governance: to health, to social equality and security. As a world-wide group working on issues of development through education of under-privileged children, Asha also needs to consider these questions regarding real freedom.

These questions arise often, and they did come up again the East Coast Conference. The updates from the conferences are available online. (East Coast and West Coast)

At the East Coast conference, there was discussion centered on project evaluation and the role of Asha volunteers in connecting to the actual people that the project partner serves. There was also discussion focussed on ways policies affect our projects and specific efforts like the *Trigger* and the *Sanctuary* initiatives. Very often, our projects are islands of development: a fact that many project partners and stewards accept as being a challenge. Initiatives like the *Learning Network*, *Trigger* and *Sanctuary* are attempts by Asha volunteers to address the issues at a scale larger than that of a project or a chapter.

Asha is growing at quite a pace, adding almost one new chapter every month: this means additional volunteers and projects. At this stage, it becomes important to consider ways to work together as Asha, rather than as individual volunteers and chapters. The two regional conferences in the US have come up with proposals to encourage a greater understanding of the issues, in terms of both scale and depth. If Asha were to play a role more impactful than the present one, support from chapters and volunteers is essential to address these questions.

*Work An Hour*, as an Asha-wide fund raiser, plays an important role in getting volunteers across the world together to support the projects. 6 consecutive years have also seen it grow very fast in terms of fund raising capability. Using its Asha-wide nature, we need to foster it to evolve as a tool for us to address issues of development at a larger scale, beyond



that of individual projects.

Starting with this issue, there will be regular contributions from chapters and volunteers from Asha-India in the *Patrika*. Efforts are also being made to include one section focussing on specific issues that chapters can use as starting points for discussions outside of their respective projects. Reiterating the importance of volunteer contributions to the *Patrika*, it can be a forum for sharing learning on various aspects of projects, publicity and fund raising only with regular contributions from volunteers themselves based on their learning.

Chap coords, please forward the *Patrika* issues to your appropriate chapter lists.

-Editor



## FEEDBACK ON *Patrika*

**Please send your queries, comments, suggestions to**

**editor at [ashanet dot org](mailto:ashanet.org)**

## COORDINATION ITEMS

### International Registration for Asha

As Asha chapters increase steadily in North America, Europe and India, we need to be cognizant of operating principles for an organization like ours with a global presence. In order to address that, the coordination team has initiated a process to look into the international incorporation of the organization. This means that all Asha chapters can share one non-profit tax id. Currently, the US chapters do share one non-profit tax id, but the Europe chapters have their own. We are communicating with the Europe chapters to get their feedback on European regulations so that we can continue to move forward on this exercise.

In addition to incorporation, the second step the coordination team will take is with respect to protecting our brand (TM and copyright). Since we are looking to get this work done pro bono, it is naturally taking some time. We are hoping that this item will be closed by the end of the year. If any volunteer has contacts in the legal industry, please email me at netika at gmail dot com.

*-Netika Raval Asha SV*

### Online Recurring Donations

*- Swift and Effortless Way To Build A Sustainable Donor Base*

Asha Chapters worldwide struggle to raise funds to support projects. Sporadic events are only helpful in raising funds on one time basis. In order to alleviate this incessant problem, Asha NYC/NJ volunteer Shailen Mistry has created a user friendly online interface for setting up recurring donations. This activity generates a high return on volunteer effort and help create a sustainable donor database. Hence, the volunteer time saved could be utilized towards focussing on various aspects of projects which is the crux of Asha. Through online recurring donations chapters can potentially reach out to a larger population. The other benefit is that online donations are easy on heavily burdened treasurers. Collecting checks, depositing in bank and writing receipts consume major chunk of treasurer's time.

I highly recommend the chapters to use the online recurring donation interface. It is a great way to get regular ongoing donations to your chapter, SAC program, marathon runners, etc. Here is the step by step approach to set up recurring donations:

A new instructions page has been set up for recur-

ring donations at <https://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/admin/donate-recurring-instructions.php> Chapter login/password are required to setup and access recurring donations. One can set up either monthly/quarterly, biannually or annually recurring deposits.

Here are the Asha-wide stats till date - Currently there are 66 recurring donations scheduled that bring in ~ \$2000 every month. There are 14 chapters using the online recurring donation interface.

UIUC has 12 recurring donations NYCNJ has 7 Dallas has 7 MIT has 4 Seattle has 4

Others chapters like Stanford, Colorado, DC, Chicago, Detroit, Cornell, CentralNJ, and Cleveland have 1-3 each.

To learn about High ROE (Return on Effort) activities like this one, please join PR/Fundraising conference call on 3rd Saturday of every month at 12 Noon EST. If you have any questions feel free to contact me (sameerkalra@gmail.com)

*Sameer Kalra, Asha- CNJ*

### Revival Of Chapter At Asha - Purdue

We would like to announce that Asha - Purdue Chapter has been revived. The idea to "start" an Asha chapter at Purdue was mooted by our faculty advisor Dr. Saurabh Bagchi, who was involved with Asha during his graduate student years at UIUC. Currently we are about 50 members strong and membership is on the rise.

The fact that an Asha chapter once existed at Purdue worked for us in one sense, and against us in another. People were at least vaguely aware of what Asha stood for, having heard of the past chapter. However, the impermanence of the earlier Asha chapter may have led to the development of prejudiced notions against our attempt to establish a fresh chapter.

The key to Asha's success lies in ensuring that the organisation is greater than the sum of its components. Towards this end, we are always on the lookout for new members who share our vision and zeal. We encourage our members to actively participate in meetings and sit on committees to execute projects. To keep Asha - Purdue going in spite of constant modifications in membership is indeed a challenge,

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but we believe that we are up to it. Having registered Asha as a Purdue Student Organisation helps with logistics, e.g. publicity efforts, scheduling meeting and event venues. The flip side of this is that we are constrained to conform to Student Organisation rules, which sometimes turns out to be time consuming due to the University regulations.

We look forward to networking with our sister chapters to achieve our goal of improving the educational prospects of our less fortunate brethren in India.

-Govindarajan Kothandaraman email - ashapur at expert dot ics dot purdue dot edu  
web - <http://www.purdue.edu/asha>

### Summary Of Coordination Call

The coordination call on every Saturday are being well attended and useful for resolving issues. On the August 7th, coordination call, we had a discussion on the relationship between Asha India and Asha ROW. This was a follow-up to the email threads on the same subject.

The main contention by Ravi Verma and Rajesh Elayavalli was that the legal relationship between Asha India and Asha ROW needs to be clarified and documented. It was useful to have Deepak Gupta from India on the call. He communicated the existing structure at Asha India and the decision making process for policy, project and chapter recognition purposes.

The communication lapse between Asha India and Asha ROW was acknowledged and suggestions to remedy that situation were invited. The suggestions are to have an Asha India representative on the coord call once a month and on the PR team. Also, it was acknowledged that documenting conference minutes and decisions made needs improvement.

Overall, there was complete agreement that Asha India and Asha ROW are one in spirit and that we will continue to work together. A team comprised of active asha volunteers involved over a period of time will document the working relationship between Asha India and Asha ROW. Our working relationship will be reflected on the Asha India website, in that it is a sister organization. Details in the coord minutes posted.

-Netika Raval, Asha SV

## ASK AND KNOW

### Newsletters

Q: what are the other regular publications in Asha?

A: The Asha-Kiran was a newsletter that went out to donors. It is archived at

<http://ashanet.org/newsletters.html>.

Many chapters also bring out newsletters detailing their activities. A few examples are :

Asha - CNJ:

<http://www.ashanet.org/centralnj/files/March2004HoH.pdf>

Asha NYC-NJ:

<http://www.ashanet.org/nycnj/resources/newsletters/nwsltr-2004-3.15.pdf>

Asha - SV:

[http://www.ashanet.org/siliconvalley/2003\\_ashasv\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://www.ashanet.org/siliconvalley/2003_ashasv_annual_report.pdf)

Asha- Seattle:

<http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/resources/newsletters/index.php>

Asha - Zurich:

<http://www.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Zurich/Publicity/zuriodhay/zuriodhay-may2004-en.pdf>

and

<http://www.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Zurich/Operations/Reports/annualreport-final.pdf>

The annual reports are available at:

<http://www.ashanet.org/reports.html>

These are templates that chapters can use for their newsletters and annual reports.

That's all for now, folks. Have a nice month ahead!

Disclaimer: The views expressed in *Asha Patrika* are not necessarily those of Asha For Education. The views of the editor(s) do not necessarily reflect those of Asha and the views expressed by volunteers do not necessarily reflect those of the editor(s).