



Asha Deep

Asha for Education's Madison chapter

Fall 2001 Newsletter

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Asha's 2002 Calendars



Asha's 2002 Calendars are now available! Asha-Madison is selling these calendars for \$10 (plus shipping if it needs to be mailed to you). Contact Paramjit Oberoi (param@cs.wisc.edu, 257-9187).

Project updates

Muskaan is an organization working for education of slum children in Bhopal. At present it is working for children in a particular slum (Ganganagar) where families of the *Gond* tribe reside. Muskaan was started 3 years ago by Shivani Taneja after she completed her Masters in Social Work. Following is an excerpt of a site visit done there.

Adapted from: On the Road Muskaan: Lighting up Smiles in Bhopal by Sanat Mohanty

Tultul Biswas of Ekalavya suggested we pay a visit to Shivani Taneja and Muskaan (meaning 'Smile'). The directions that we had to get to Muskaan were slightly sketchy. Further, no one in the area seemed to have heard about Muskaan. But everyone recognized the place when we changed the question: we were looking for a place where a lady teaches young kids from the slums nearby. We reached a small two-storey house in a middle class neighborhood. There were about 50 children playing and reciting poems in the courtyard outside the house. The house had a park next to it. We met Shivani Taneja inside and introduced ourselves. And then began an evening of hope and inspiration for both of us.

Shivani had graduated from Tata Institute of Social Service and had started working with a group of children from the neighboring slum. Most of the children were from families of contract laborers. When she started, people were suspicious. Initially she would go to the slum, and sit with the children in a small quadrangle in front of the temple of the slum (a 2X2X2 feet structure). Sometimes, an elder woman from the slum helped her discipline the children. This helped her gain the confidence of the people as well of the children. With help from family and friends, she was able to rent the house (the one we visited) and use it as a school. The park next to it was a garbage dump of the neighborhood; she enthused the children to clean it up and use it as their playground despite the passive resistance from the neighborhood. She helped the children perform a skit show and exhibition of arts and crafts to help raise funds.

The goal of Muskaan has been to help the children from the slum get up to speed with the syllabus of the government school in the vicinity so that they could make use of government machinery. Muskaan also provides a safe environment for these children to play, learn and grow. Shivani says that the drop out rate has been low. Despite the heartening success, she still has

hurdles to cross. Getting funds is always a worry. During the visit, Shivani shared her conflicts with us. She told us how she was influenced by some other social issues relevant to the people she worked with - poor health, alcoholism, wife-beating. She told us how she tried to stay focused on education and health of the children since her resources were limited. It was an eye opener to see how Shivani has almost single handedly dealt with finance and administrative issues of Muskaan successfully and has been spreading education and smiles among a group of children.

Asha-Madison has been supporting Muskaan for a year. A total of \$6300 was recently sent from the Michigan State University chapter of Asha, of which \$1500 was provided by Madison. Muskaan does not have any immediate funding requirements but we will be monitoring the project for updates.

Vivekananda Foundation

Asha-Boston and Asha-Madison are funding a project which actively focuses on improving government schools in rural southern Karnataka. We support 8- 9 social workers (for a total of around \$5500, about \$600 per social worker per year), who intervene between a total of 40 rural government schools.

The schools that these social workers are working on have been recently adopted by Vivekananda Foundation under the school adoption scheme in Karnataka.

The schools being targeted by the workers are primary schools from classes 1 through 7. The project started functioning at the beginning of this school year. The social workers have to visit at least two schools every day and discuss with the teachers the problems they are having, and have follow up after the workshops. There have also been science and environmental training workshops for the teachers from these government schools. About 100 primary school science teachers participated at these workshops.

The social workers also try to visit the parents to get their involvement.

Since Vivekananda Foundation has already adopted the school they can address these needs, instead of waiting for the government to do so. However it is not committed to addressing any infrastructural needs in order to keep the cost of the project low. Asha-Madison is currently providing 2400\$ per year for the project. This year we have sent 1200\$ since the project started only mid-way through the year. For further information about the site visits and workshop details, please visit our website.

Work-An-Hour 2001

Work-an-Hour is Asha's annual online fundraiser where people from around the world make a donation on August 15th (India's Independence Day) to support selected projects that have large funding requirements. The date itself is symbolic and donations are accepted from July 4 to Sep 5. Work an Hour 2001 was the fourth and most successful edition of this event with more than \$100,000 being raised by more than 1400 donors. For more information about the projects supported by WAH 2001, please visit our web site.

River Rites Concert

On Friday October 5th, Asha Madison had organized a dance concert, River

Rites, featuring Bharatanatyam exponent, Aparna Sindhoor, along with her group from the Navarasa Dance



Theater, Boston. Aparna Sindhoor, who hails from Mysore, India and now living in the United States, is an accomplished choreographer and dancer trained in Bharatanatyam (one of the Indian classical dance

forms) for over 20 years. Since 1996, Aparna has been working on stories (*The Incident and After, The Hunt, Clothes, Draupadi, River Rites*) written by people of color.

This concert wasn't meant to be a fundraiser, but rather was part of an endeavor to create more awareness about contemporary social issues, and was an opportunity for our chapter to gain more visibility in the local community.

The unique feature about Aparna's performance is her belief that art must be relevant to people's lives. Hence, her work with contemporary themes has resulted in the creation of a new style of performance that blends Indian classical dance, folk dance, yoga, world music and narration giving a new dimension to the content of performance which has made her work more interesting and accessible. Her performance in Madison was especially dedicated to the people of the Narmada valley, and comprised an interesting blend of dance and drama to portray the uprooting of the many lives there. The concert was well attended by a diverse audience of around 200 people.

Manthan 2001

This summer, Asha-Madison initiated a new forum for organizations in the Midwest, that work on issues related to social development in India, to meet, exchange ideas, share best practices, establish personal bonds, and increase collaboration. This resulted in the mini conference, Manthan 2001, held on Aug 25-26 in Memorial Union at Madison. The Madison Chapter of Asha for Education hosted it and was attended by a total of 24 people from the Minneapolis and Milwaukee chapters of Association for India's Development (AID), the Chicago chapter of Asha for Education, the Cincinnati chapter of India Development Service (IDS), the Chicago chapter of Shikshantar, and Sankalp, based in Ames, Iowa.

The broad focus of the conference was to foster collaboration and information sharing between the attending organizations and also initi-



ate discussions of broader issues affecting volunteer-based organizations.

Attendees shared their experiences with fund-raising, attracting volunteers, and handling projects. AID-Minneapolis drew attention to their innovative Shramdaan and Aksharotsav fundraising programs. Emphasis was placed on making one's presence felt in the local community and of projecting a social image that can attract volunteers and donors. Attendees also felt that volunteer retention and turn-over were major problems and that mentoring, developing personal bonds, and encouraging participation in events would help in fostering a strong volunteer base and the spirit of volunteerism.

Another related outcome from these discussions was to create an information sharing network so that participating organizations can be aware of events and ongoing projects at each of the organizations. This immediately bore fruit with Asha-Madison, AID-Minneapolis and Sankalp subsequently organizing dance concerts by the Navarasa Dance Theater of Boston (see article in this newsletter).

Mechanisms for approving projects and evaluating their progress were also discussed, especially in the role of the site visits. Attendees realized the importance of sharing information about NGOs and supported projects to increase collaboration and get a better picture of the project's activities. There is an ongoing effort to establish a comprehensive database of NGOs and projects in India

that are being supported by organizations in the US.

Relating to the future goals of volunteer based organizations, it was pointed out that there should be a space for social activism beyond fundraising and supporting projects, especially connecting to mass movements and struggles in India. There was a debate on whether we can create such a space within organizations like AID or Asha. The consensus was that there should be a network of people who are interested in such issues and who can bring different expertise to the table. This network can then work together either by spreading awareness here or by directly taking part in movements in India.

Discussions on globalization tried to present an understandable picture of the complex network of institutions such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank that are slowly acquiring more global powers in the name of liberalization and free trade. Attendees soon discovered that the issues were very complex and that further research was needed to be done to get a full understanding of the implications of globalization and how it affects countries like India.

Finally, there was a discussion led by Shikshantar on the nature of the education system in India. Shikshantar is a research group that focuses on a transformation of the education system in India to increase self-reliance, creativity and sustainability. The group told the attendees about its learning center in Udaipur in Rajasthan that serves as a test-bed for their ideas. There was also a vigorous debate on how education in

India can be improved and be made more meaningful and relevant.

For more details about Manthan 2001, including the agenda, minutes, action items, and photos, please visit the Asha-Madison website.