

**Monthly Newsletter: February 2008**

**Mission :** Asha for Education is a non-profit secular organization dedicated to change in India by focusing on basic education in the belief that education is a critical requisite for socio-economic change.

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**MESSAGE FROM ANAND RAGHAVAN, ASHA PRESIDENT**

Anand took some time off from his demanding schedule to answer a few pertinent questions.

**NYC/NJ: Why do you think Asha is relevant today?**

Anand: Organizations like Asha are very relevant in today's world, at several levels. Most importantly, our mission and objectives are still very relevant in terms of lack of access to quality education and resources, as well as lack of freedom for participatory and empowered decision making within communities in large parts of India. As long as India continues to be in the hundreds in terms of the Human Development Index with so many millions out of school, poor quality of education for those who go to school, lack of income generation and poverty alleviation frameworks in so many thousands of districts, serious malnutrition and health related problems nationwide, we have our work cut out for us. Both in terms of working with partners in addressing these needs, as well as in terms of demanding good policies of the government and utilizing government resources and frameworks like RTI to ensure that the precious little resources that are put to address these issues are put to good use.

At another level, Asha is as relevant for the volunteers who are part of it, as it is for the children and communities who benefit. So many volunteers who I have spoken to talk about the transformatory experience Asha has been, in terms of their understanding of our society and personal responsibility towards informed action. I think that Asha for Education is as much for the education of its own volunteers as it is for the education of children in India.

**NYC/NJ: What direction do you see Asha going?**

Anand: The direction will emerge out of where we as a collective want Asha to go. Based on my observations, I do see some agreement in terms of where we are headed, and trends in terms of what steps to take to get there. For example, many chapters now understand the need for international registration and the need for good processes in place to help us grow organically at our current rate of growth.

There was a lot of participation in the Right to Education bill discussions, and growing agreement that we need to engage at a policy level when we can. While a lot of this work has been going on quite actively in Asha India for several years, specifically around RTI, Right to Food, exploitation of resources like water etc, commitment from Asha Abroad towards a broader understanding of these issues have been sorely lacking. Given the size of our organization, it is high time we spent some time understanding the issues, and attempting to get some changes brought in.

Through efforts of different chapters, there seems to be a growing understanding that we need to work with the government school system and see what can be done to make it better, rather than create parallel structures everywhere. We need volunteers to plug-in into the Ashawide community more often, to talk to others about the work their project partners do, and to learn together as an organization. We need to actively contribute towards a central knowledge database where we can share learning from our work and best practices to guide us. We should think beyond the one project in one chapter model to a collection of projects under one focus group and what the learning from them has been and how they can benefit from each other's experience. We need to think beyond fundraisers as an end to themselves towards a projects driven fundraising model where there is an active participation of the project champions and the focus group coordinators towards raising funds for their projects for that year.

**NYC/NJ: How can we better comprehend the underlying issues in a community which is rarely reflected in a project proposal?**

Anand: Working with Asha India is one way of understanding/reviewing a project proposal better. We are already doing this for proposals that we receive through Asha India.

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**TEAMASHA AT THE PARIS HALF MARATHON ON MARCH 2ND 2008**

Asha volunteers, **Sapna Vijayakumar, Vishnu Mohan, Manav Agarwal, Prasanth Ramanand, Nitya Oberoi, and Shika Saraf**, participated in the 16th Paris half marathon which took place this Sunday, March 2nd 2008. Wearing Asha for Education t-shirts, they ran alongside 23,000 other runners, spreading the word of our organization. Great job guys!

## ASHA BOOK CLUB

And the **WINNER** is....

### "Creating a world without Poverty" -by Muhammad Yunus

“What if you could harness the power of the free market to solve the problems of poverty, hunger, and inequality? To some, it sounds impossible. But Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus is doing exactly that. As founder of Grameen Bank, Yunus pioneered microcredit, the innovative banking program that provides poor people—mainly women—with small loans they use to launch businesses and lift their families out of poverty.

Now, in *Creating a World Without Poverty*, Yunus goes beyond microcredit to pioneer the idea of *social business*—a completely new way to use the creative vibrancy of business to tackle social problems from poverty and pollution to inadequate health care and lack of education. This book describes how Yunus—in partnership with some of the world’s most visionary business leaders—has launched the world’s first purposely designed social businesses.” **Read more about the author at [www.muhammadyunus.org](http://www.muhammadyunus.org)**

Tune in to learn more about the book club meetings and online message board.

For more details about the Asha Book Club contact Sharad Sundararajan—[sharad.sundararajan\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:sharad.sundararajan[at]gmail.com).

## PROJECT SPOTLIGHT— SANKURATHRI FOUNDATION



Located about 560kms away from Hyderabad, Kakinada is a small town in rural Andhra Pradesh which earned its spot in the hearts of many due to the relentless spirit of one visionary, Dr. Chandrasekhar Sankurathri. Having lost his wife and two young children in a fatal plane crash, Dr. Chandrasekhar chose to bring meaning to his loss and returned to his wife’s native in Kakinada. With the support of Manjari Sankurathri Foundation established in memory of his wife, Dr. Chandrasekhar started **Sarada Vidyalayam** and **Srikiran Institute of Ophthalmology** in rural Kakinada, providing essential services of primary education and eye care to the poor and needy.

Sarada Vidyalayam, named after his daughter, was established in 1992 and provides education up to 7th grade, recently increased to 10th grade, in a well structured, disciplined environment producing amazing academic results. It is also noteworthy that there is a zero drop out rate among the young students and the graduates have moved on to higher education. This is significant when one understands that the local literacy level is about 10%. The teacher-to-student ratio is approximately 1:10 and this helps the teacher closely monitor the progress of each child and to provide individualized attention. In addition the school provides two sets of uniforms, nutritious lunch, medical check ups, and bus transportation for those children who live far from the school. Asha for Education has been a supporter of this effort since 1997 and the current funding helps cover the teachers’ salaries.



Srikiran Institute of Ophthalmology, established in 1993, is named for his son and its main objective is the eradication of avoidable blindness through the provision of accessible and affordable quality eye care for all. The institute is famous for its cataract surgery but also provides comprehensive eye care, on a sliding fee and completely free to the poorest. The clinic, with the help of skilled ophthalmologists, has performed over 90,000 surgeries and has served over a million patients through their outpatient services and community outreach programs.



“Through the relentless efforts of its dedicated staff at the Sarada Vidyalayam and Srikiran Institute of Ophthalmology, Sankurathri Foundation contributes immensely to the well-being and growth of the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh.” says Kiran Nistala, an Asha volunteer who has visited the organization several times over the years.

Presently, Sankurathri Foundation is hoping to address a critical issue facing the youth, that of lack of opportunities in rural communities to translate the high school diplomas into jobs. The foundation proposes to establish a vocational training institute on the premises. The courses being contemplated are: computer training; sewing class; electronic repairs; ophthalmic assistants training; and two-wheeler repairs training. The training institute will be the second floor addition to the existing high school building and the Foundation is soliciting funds to make this project a reality for the youth of rural Andhra Pradesh. To learn more about Sankurathri Foundation and the proposed Vocational Institute, visit our website or contact Neil Mehta, Co-Custodian of the project, [nsm2108\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:nsm2108[at]gmail.com)



- Remya Thomas

## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK (CONTINUED)

They get discussed at the Asha India conferences and whittled down to a few that are considered ideal for funding. These are then presented to Asha Abroad folks as proposals to be funded. As for proposals that we receive from other sources, many chapters do get Asha India volunteers to do site visits to these projects before we take them up for funding in Asha Abroad. Both the rural and urban Asha India chapters have been really helpful in this regard, both for first time site visits, as well as for renewal site visits to monitor progress.

If the NYC/NJ chapter has more ideas in this direction, you should definitely discuss them, write them up and post on the Asha-coordination yahoo group and we can take this up for further discussions in Asha Abroad as well as Asha India.

### NYC/NJ: Your message to the NYC/NJ chapter?

A chapter like NYC/NJ is the third largest chapter in Asha, and should have its volunteers take on Ashawide coordination roles and help move the organization forward. While it is harder for smaller chapters to find volunteers who can focus specifically on Ashawide tasks, larger chapters like Seattle and NYC/NJ should definitely take on a more active role in this. Given that we have elections coming up for the different Ashawide teams soon, I hope to see more NYC/NJ folks stepping up to take on these roles.

- Anand Raghavan

\* The views and opinions expressed by the President are personal and do not necessarily state or reflect those of the organization.

**The Fifth Annual Asha for Education 5K run/walk will take place on May 3rd, 2008 @ Riverside Park. And we want you there! Tune in... More details coming soon.**

## FEBRUARY MEETINGS & EVENTS

1. The first general meeting for the year was held on Friday, February 8th. It was a well attended meeting with nearly 45 people, including over 25 new members. We extend a warm welcome to all new volunteers. Special thanks to volunteer, Meg Mude for the meeting space.
2. February Projects Meeting, held on Feb 23rd, was a very productive meeting and Bharati, co-founder of Chintan was present. She gave an interesting speech on Chintan's work in the community and based on her experience in advocacy and policy issues, spoke on issues like rapid urbanization and privatization happening in and around Delhi and their effects on the poorest in the city. The projects discussed were Chintan and Sankurathri Foundation. A funding proposal for Sankurathri Foundation was also discussed.



3. The music concert, ROCK & RUN FOR A CAUSE 2008, benefiting our organization took place on February 23rd @ Pianos NYC. A great evening with five amazing bands— Eighty East, Ezra, Ceramic, Dana Edelman and Will Hanza—the event raised \$1400.00 towards educational initiatives in India. Kudos to Jessica Lyn Zall.



Photographs courtesy of Jessica Zall and Marcos Caceras

## QUIZ TIME!!!

Jog your memory and win a prize!!!

Questions are based on the Project spotlighted in the January newsletter.

- 1) Where is Timbaktu Collective located?
- 2) What is the ecological problem faced in the area where Timbaktu is located?
- 3) What is the underlying theme of the work that Timbaktu undertakes?
- 4) Which are the two most popular initiatives taken by Timbaktu Collective for children?
- 5) How many schools does the Alternative Education Program of Timbaktu operate?

Email answers to [thomasremya@gmail.com](mailto:thomasremya@gmail.com)  
First person who sends in all correct answers will win a gift card. **Hurry before Monday, March 10th!!!**

## ARE YOU OUT THERE?

We are looking for volunteers who

- ◆ Are experts at graphic design, web design, and multimedia presentations. or
- ◆ Have a background in journalism and public relations.

If you are the one, please contact the publicity team for more details.

If you have any announcements you would like to share with all members or newsletter content suggestions, please contact:

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