

Asha Kiran



Asha-MIT/Boston
<http://www.ashanet.org/mit>
April 2007

Get Involved !

Mission Statement :

To catalyze socio-economic change in India through education of underprivileged children.

Volunteer activities

While Asha's main focus is the support of initiatives in education, the importance of Asha in the lives of our volunteers cannot be overstated. Asha is a people-powered organization that provides a large number of energetic, creative individuals the avenue to exercise their skills and talents towards a worthy cause. In the process, volunteers get to meet and interact with interesting people, gain new perspectives and insights, and also have tons of fun.

Join Asha: We are currently recruiting new volunteers. If you would like to find out more about our projects or participate in our events or would just like to join our mailing list to know about our upcoming meetings and event notices, please contact us at: mit@ashanet.org

Meetings: We meet once every 2 weeks on an average at MIT. The meetings alternate between general and projects meetings.

“Run for a Change 2007”

- Rupinder Grewal

Team AID-Asha's 2007 Marathon Season is off to a running start

Hearts are racing, pulses are quickening and the anxiety of 'the calm before the storm' has taken over the entire marathon coordination team...and we haven't even run a mile yet! As you can well imagine, planning and executing yet another marathon season, is not an easy feat. Over the last 4 years, you have helped us raise over \$175,000 and train over 70 runners! This is the 3rd year Asha-MIT/Boston is partnering with AID-Boston (<http://TeamAidAsha.org>) to bring you another exciting year of helping couch potatoes realize their dreams of running a marathon (in reality, not just in

their minds, with a remote control in hand!); giving seasoned runners another outlet to fly like the wind and help support and encourage the 'newbies' on the Minuteman trail this summer; and funds to nourish the young minds of children all across India in AID and Asha supported projects.

We invite you to attend the expert panel and information session on Apr 15 at MIT 4-237 from 2pm to 4pm and learn more about the Run for a Change 2007 program.

Highlights of the information session:

- Run for a Change 2007 overview
- Introduction to long-distance running and training
- My Stories – hear from the runners of 2006
- How does change happen – Learn about AID and Asha
- Meet one-on-one with past runners and volunteers and network

Where: MIT Building 4, Room 237
(map: <http://whereis.mit.edu/map-jpg?selection=4>)

When: 15 April 2007, 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm

Entry: Free

For Who: Couch potatoes, seasoned runners, and everyone in between

You can register and run even if you miss the information session on 15 April at MIT. Visit <http://TeamAidAsha.org> or email us: info@teamaidasha.org



Running a Marathon: A True Success Story

- Mala L Radhakrishnan

...yeah, a marathon; someday I'd like to do one...could I actually do it?... I completed the Chicago marathon..."If I can do it, so can you!"

It's one of those things that I had always said in a very nonchalant way – *yeah, a marathon; someday I'd like to do one...* -- and I would always laugh afterward when I thought of how preposterous the idea sounded. I hadn't run for over ten years, and even before that, I consistently took near last-place in the 800-meter track races in high school....and that's not even *two percent* of a marathon!

Last Spring, when I heard about the TeamAIDAsha marathon training program, I was intrigued, yet very doubtful that I could commit. In my opinion, there were several rational reasons to say no. First, there was the fact that the Saturday morning training runs would start at hours I never knew existed. Then there was the fact that my little experience with running had been mostly competitive, and I hated the feeling of not being "fast enough". Also, the fundraising component of the marathon program was daunting for me. Being a graduate student with friends who are mostly students themselves, how could I convince them to donate what precious little money they had? Finally – and maybe the most important reason – my friends and family looked at my scrawny stature with furrowed brows when I said I was considering a marathon: "Are you serious?" If they didn't think I could do it, *could I actually do it?*

I think I will be forever grateful for an infinitesimal moment of irrationality that opened my mind enough to go to an Team AIDAsha marathon information session. There I saw myself surrounded by a bunch of others like me – people who questioned their abilities and were literally scared at the prospect of running twenty-six-point-two miles. Nevertheless, all of us had tossed the idea around in our heads before, thinking "Wouldn't that be cool?" And I knew it was worth a try. How could I say no to the opportunity to train for a marathon while simultaneously helping to support education in India? There was something almost unfair about the "win-win-ness" of the situation, like I'd be having my cake and eating it too --- and not gaining weight due to all the exercise!

I have to admit – I was so worried about embarrassing myself at the first training run that I "practiced" on my own in the couple of weeks leading up to it, starting at less than a half-mile, which was pretty much all I could muster at first. But after the first few group training sessions, most of my so-called "rational" fears melted away.

Getting up in the mornings was easy because I knew I'd see the familiar faces of Padma, Surya, Pradeep, and other friends I'd made. I knew I'd see Coach Jonathan giving us useful tips before our run. I knew Tina would be waiting for us at the end with bananas and a congratulatory smile, and various other Asha and AID friends would be dispensing water and words of encouragement along the way. I found the opposite of competition – an overwhelming spirit of support and well-wishing all around – whether someone was running an eight-minute mile or walking a fifteen-minute mile. I saw my friends and family swallow their words when they saw me successfully reaching 5, 10, 15, and 20 miles. Due to their excitement over my success, I found it surprisingly easy to obtain generous donations to support the meaningful and worthwhile cause. But most importantly, I saw a transition from within myself – from someone who had always thought "Wouldn't that be cool?" to someone who knows that it is. At some point during the training, maybe when we had our first double-digit training run, I knew I could run a marathon.

I completed the Chicago marathon last year in 4 hours and 57 minutes. It was a freezing cold day, but the warmth from the cheering crowd kept my spirits high. As I crossed the finish line, I had the unforgettable feeling of being so energized on one hand and so completely exhausted on the other. But I knew, at that moment, I had run a marathon, and that was something I could own for the rest of my life.

I highly recommend the TeamAIDAsha marathon program. For anyone who is interested in running a marathon, this is one of the best ways to train; the amount of support, personal mentorship, and organization is excellent. The passion for the cause is heartfelt and honest. The training regimen is well-planned, and I felt educated about ways to prevent injury --- these are important benefits of training within a well-organized group. Most importantly, I felt like part of a team whose members were all pushing themselves in new ways and realizing that their limitations were illusions. I think nearly every member of last year's Team AID Asha marathon team would agree with my recommendation to anyone remotely toying with the idea of running this year: "If I can do it, so can you!"

Project Site Visit: SPRAT

- Parthiv Shah

I recently saw the film "Parzania" in a Bangalore movie theater while on an extended visit to India. Banned in Gujarat, the movie was inspired by the disappearance of a young Parsi boy named Azhar during the bloody communal violence in Ahmedabad that followed the Godhra train episode. Many moviegoers, myself included, were shocked & ashamed by the images of helpless victims of a violent mob seemingly neglected by the police and government apparatus installed to protect all citizens.

That shock and dismay turned into cautious hope when I visited SPRAT, the Society for the Promotion of Rational Thinking. Started by Mr. Hasan Jowher, a secular Muslim and long-time Ahmedabad resident, SPRAT aims to fight communalism by promoting rational thought processes and harmony among all local communities. The Asha-MIT/Boston chapter supports the Mehsana CARAVAN, one of six CARAVAN community centers that serve underprivileged members of the community- many who have been directly affected by communal violence. Located an hour's drive north of Ahmedabad, the Mehsana CARAVAN center's offerings includes high school exam tutoring classes, libraries and reading rooms. It serves as a safe place for members of the underserved community to study and learn. Asha-MIT/Boston funds are being utilized for SSC (10th grade) and HSC (12th grade) coaching courses, as well as to develop a set of Science Corner experiments aimed at increasing exposure to scientific explanation of phenomena that are often portrayed as supernatural by those wishing to exploit the undereducated.

In addition to the many education focused activities, SPRAT is dedicated to building a safe place for underprivileged children to play in Ahmedabad. Their MUSKAAN park is located at the border between poor Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods, the children of which would rarely play together. Built from all recycled materials donated by local companies, the recent opening of the park on the 5 year anniversary of the Godhra aftermath has literally seen thousands of children make use of the park in its first days.

Our visit to SPRAT ended by meeting the SPRAT staff in the head office in Ahmedabad. One of the most moving symbols of tolerance and dedication to helping others was a Muslim volunteer who was directly caught in the violent mob five years back. Despite his family's pleas for help going largely unanswered by the police during the tense moments when he lost track his sister, he surprisingly harbors no ill will to the larger Hindu community, instead pointing out that she was brought back safely by his Hindu neighbors. It gave me hope that some real healing may result from the efforts of a dedicated few. Friends, these are the examples of good work being done in India that must be supported by overseas well wishers such as our Asha chapter.



Project Site Visit: Sahanivasa

- Rajeev Annaluru

Impressions from my Site Visit

I always wondered as to how India has always carried this incredible impression in the international community as a successful, proactive and a participatory democracy when in fact the ground reality tends to give a different perception. Especially when the headline news in the Indian media always speaks on a daily basis about human rights violations, corruption, government red tape etc. Have we set our standards so low that we call this a successful democracy in spite of all the problems we see with it?

Although I carried this impression for the most part of my life (and I still do in some ways), I started to rethink my opinion lately. Courtesy: my visit to a few remote (tribal) villages in Chittoor and Nellore districts recently. During my visit I could see how a collective effort of the people *can* catalyze a social change in our society and how our Indian constitution, though touted as a blunt-edged knife, facilitates people to speak their will, if they want to. I could see how our democracy could manifest itself in social welfare, if the society is ready to participate in governance.

My recent visit has been on one of my most memorable trips to rural India. The purpose of the trip was to visit an organization called Sahanivasa, a long time partner of Asha-MIT/Boston. Sahanivasa along with the APVVU is involved in three different components supported by Asha in Chittoor and Nellore districts of AP: after-school educational programs, Tsunami rehabilitation (which I will talk about in a future article), and making the NREGA (rural employment guarantee act) successful. In each of these components Sahanivasa focuses on the participation of the people, of society, as that is the only path to sustainability of progress. After a 13 hour ride from Hyderabad to Sullurpet town all kinds of discoveries were waiting for me as I was picked up by Mr. Chenniah and other Sahanivasa volunteers.

Implementing NREGA

NREGA is perhaps one of the most progressive and interesting bills passed by the Indian parliament in recent time. This bill seems to hold the potential to bring a huge change in rural India. This bill on one hand can

reap the rich human resources available in rural India to develop the most essential infrastructural facilities and on the other hand stem the migration of farmers/rural workers to cities. APVVU, Mr. Chenniah told me, was at the forefront of the efforts for a long time to have the NREGA bill passed in the Indian parliament. The NREGA bill essentially guarantees employment in rural areas for 100 days in a year, through work such as building roads, improving water supply, and such works that are necessary to improve the village.

We visited "Kurichivedu", one of the villages where the NREGA work was in progress. When we arrived work was being done at a nearby lake (strengthening the lake bund/embankment). Ms. Suria Rajani showed me some of the work that have already been completed like the road that was paved to the nearby burial ground, a few rain water harvesting pits, a small rain water draining duct to prevent inundation of roads during rainy season etc. It was interesting to see the majority of workers were women. NREGA is unique in the sense that it emphasizes equal opportunity for men and women to participate in the work. They would get the same wage too.

When we arrived at the work location, we had a meeting with the workers under the shade of a banyan tree adjoining the lake. Ms. Suria Rajani seemed to know most of the women by their names. I was told that Farmers Union (APVVU) was active in that village for the past few years. Tamil was the native language in this village (due to its proximity to Tamilnadu). Ms. Suria Rajani inquired the workers about (mostly in Tamil) how the EGA work was going on and if they were getting paid regularly etc.

Apparently, this part of the state sees a lot of migration from villages to cities like Bangalore and Chennai during the months of December to May. The villagers tend to migrate along with their families in hope that they might be able to employ their children in cities. This is not only exposing the children to the hazards of child labor but also leads to children dropping out of school during the academic year. Migration thus causes a lot of other concerns in these villages, and I could see how migration was directly connected to

Projects Site Visit Contd..

lack of education for children.

Without a doubt, EGA bill has the potential to change the socio-economic landscape in rural India in the long term. But as with any other legislation, it is practically impossible to make it foolproof. Middlemen coming into illegal nexuses with corrupt govt. officials to swig away the EGA funds are to be expected. The only way corruption can be stemmed is by proactive people's involvement in the implementation process. People should start questioning the officials for transparency in the process and get proper information about creation of rosters and disbursement of funds. And as such, it feels like RTI (Right to Information Act) should and will become the primary weapon for people.

At the back of my mind I am skeptical, if that will happen. Is our rural population educated enough to even know that they can question the government officials? Can we expect them to be wise enough to ask for their rightful information when they are ignorant enough to borrow loans at 50% interest rate? I don't think so. This leaves us with the question as to how can we make sure that these cutting edge laws like RTI and NREGA don't face the same unfortunate fate as a myriad of other Indian legislations that died a gradual death as saplings. What challenges do we, as an organization, have ahead of us?

It is a very interesting time in the history of independent India, when the govt. is taking steps to provide its citizens with rights that it never gave before. I am speaking of bills like Right to Education, Right to Information, Right to Employment (EGA) and Right for Food. But given our semi-socialist and semi-capitalist governance structure, proactive participation of people is of prime importance to make sure these laws are implemented properly. And I guess that is where organizations like Asha come into the picture. We should do what ever it takes to make the uneducated rural Indian be aware of his rights and be able to fight for them. We should make him strong enough to fight his own fights instead of we fighting it for him. At a different level, I think we should also have it in our agenda to spread awareness in the Indian middle class about these laws and try to invoke them into action. Because it has always been the middle class that has set the trends and cultures in our country. Make no mistake, that's when I think India can become a true participatory and successful democracy.



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