

Fellows Call: Vallabh Bhai (17 Sep 2010)

Vallabh bhai has been involved with grassroots social work since 1996 and is with Asha since 2001. He is currently doing the administrative work (auditing, reporting, correspondence etc.) for Varanasi chapter of Asha India (Asha India has 16 chapters and 7 of them have their own bank accounts). He is also involved in the NREGA, RTI, RTE, campaigns. His activities are detailed below.

1) Handling Interns.

He was supervisor to 8 interns this year:

- Benjamin from Arizona (March, 4 months) visited different education related projects
- Ankit from UPenn (3 months) studied Musahar community
- Anushree, Aditi (45 days in June, July) conducted a feedback survey on Women in NREGA
- Clair Wolf from U Chicago (July to Nov) is studying 300 SHG's, also teaching in a school for handicapped

2) Education

-- Teacher training camp was organized with the help of Mahesh bhai (Kanpur) and I K Shukla. 24 teachers from 6 schools in Balia were trained. The camp was conducted by Varun, and an Asha teacher, with the help of a local teacher. Usually, the teachers are educated till 10th-12th grade and they have no primary training on teaching. So, the objective of the teacher training program is to help them, train them, check their level of improvement through objective type tests.

-- A summer camp was organized this year for 80 students (Asha supported) and it involved painting, singing, street theater, educational tours etc. A cultural workshop was also organized this year in Kanpur and Benaras.

-- With the implementation of RTE on 1st April, the role of NGO has increased. In 3 years, it is expected that UP will have a shortage of 3-4 lakh teachers. Many neighborhood schools need to be opened esp. in remote areas (like brick kilns). As a result, NGOs had a meeting in October about their role. They are petitioning the govt. for more schools, better student: teacher ratio, teacher training programs. As a provision of RTE, 25% reservation for underprivileged children has been implemented in all private schools, which is a huge challenge as currently schools do not want to implement this. Two of the Asha schools (Balia and Madhepura) can be registered under RTE.

-- In 2005-06, 205 libraries were opened with 500-600 books each. This year Vallabh bhai approached publishers to get more books for 20-22 libraries.

-- Mid-day meal program is also being monitored in 5 schools per block by Asha volunteers and will require constant follow-up.

3) RTI

-- An RTI awareness camp is organized every Thursday near Tehsil HQ for 3 to 4 hours (for around 4 years now).

-- A Tehsil divas is organized on Tuesdays and Thana divas on Saturdays.

- Awareness activities at these camps are pamphlet distribution on RTI, NREGA, anganwadi program etc.
- Recently, there has been a surge in violence against RTI activists, some of them have been even murdered. Efforts are on to get govt. attention to this issue.
- Corruption of Information Commissioners is another issue. A signature campaign has been started to protest against this.
- RTI workshops are regularly organized with different groups of people -- colleges, retired people etc.
- Examples of RTI petitions: street lights worth 7 lakhs were installed, BEd. colleges were charged "donations" for giving admission to students. An RTI application resulted in govt. order to 54 colleges to explain these charges
- The tree plantation work was better supervised through RTI's.
- Application was filed to UGC on unrecognized univs issue, fraudulent "money doubling schemes" and other fraudulent organizations were challenged through RTI to relevant govt. depts.

4) NREGA

- Awareness efforts are regularly made to make people "demand work" through NREGA. NREGA mazdoor union is also being formed.
- Asha recently audited NREGA plantation work in 2 districts, which is the first initiative of close work with govt.
- Musahar community in eastern UP is being surveyed to get them involved in NREGA work in 2-3 years.

-- Q: Do we have statistics on influence of our work on NREGA? A: There is exact data available for 2 districts (9 blocks). Work in other districts is not organized enough to have hard data. Usually, the tracking mechanism is to meet every 3-4 months to discuss specific problems in different areas. Rajeev (?) has some statistics on this. Jonathan (from Boston) interned with Vallabh bhai and conducted a survey on NREGA (on no. of people and % of days). His finding was 70% people got job cards and no-one got 100 days of work.

5) Misc. work

- Asha is involved in auditing (15 months project) a UNICEF project, Nirantar which has an involvement of 50% women from 30 villages in Benaras.
- Benaras is a hub of NGO's because it is a major city of Poorvanchal. As a result, Asha Benaras is involved in many efforts-- deaths, forced land acquisition (SEZ and highways) protests, PDS improvements, Gomukh to Ganga sagar march, Nithari scandal, Ayodhya verdict, Benaras Univ (behavior with students), individual cases, panchayat elections, domestic violence etc.

Q and A

Tanu: What problems do you expect (esp. in Benaras) with the implementation of RTE?

Vallabh bhai: In the 3-4 states he is involved, he feels it's the same case. It is impossible for govt. machinery to reach to the remote places. Also, closure of informal schools will not help.

Rajeev: How is 25% reservation in private schools being implemented?

Vallabh bhai: Private schools do not want to take students from underprivileged backgrounds. On July 24th, 2 such students were taken

to a private school. The school authorities told them that the school was not aided and they do not know anything about RTE. This year no private school implemented reservation. One school authorities made separate sheds and taught children of their staff (cleaner, guards etc.) there to bypass the reservation issue. Since were powerful people (mafia, businessmen) are involved in running these schools it is a very difficult job to get reservation implemented.

Rajeev: What will happen to schools Asha Boston supports?

Vallabh bhai: We need to apply for govt. approval in groups. Have the applications postmarked. Otherwise, it will be hard to track them. Boston will separately talk to Vallabh bhai on this.

Vallabh bhai: We have a huge problem of corruption in UP information commission. Information commissions work only 2-3 hours a day, sometimes only 10-20 complaints are heard by the whole commission in a day. Also, there are big problems in getting info when big corporations are involved. These corporations also get court stays in order to not divulge info.