

Asha is a community health and development society dedicated to improving the lives of slum dwellers in Delhi

Asha begins work in a new slum

The massacre was 26 years ago, but the memory still haunts all of us", said Taravanti, a 75-year-old widow. "It was a very long night", she recalls, "and we had turned off all the lights. My son, daughter-in-law and I held hands in a corner of our house and prayed. We prayed that we'd be left alone – that we'd be able to carry on the happy and peaceful lives we'd been living. But", Taravanti breaks down in tears as she goes on, "the screams and sound of gunfire kept growing louder. They were very close. We ran. We left everything and fled into the night, terrified".

During the riots of 1984 thousands of Punjabi Hindus were killed. A large number of poor families that had no protection escaped and came to West Delhi, settling in a slum that came to be known as Peera Garhi relief camp.

"Though we had lost our lives' savings", she continues, "we were fortunate to be alive and together - some people lost everyone. At first the Government gave us and the other families aid to help us find our feet, but our losses were huge and we couldn't recover. Life became a struggle for us. And then, some years later, the Government stopped their aid. That was the year my son died". Taravanti couldn't speak any more.

A neglected slum, full of people who still mourn the loss of the family members, Peera Garhi is not the kind of place anyone would like to live in. Open drains that run next to many of the huts are clogged with plastic bags and other waste. The only hospitals around are private hospitals that residents cannot afford. As a result, hardly any children are immunised, women die during childbirth, and the infant and child mortality rates are extremely high.



Taravanti outside her room



Most children do not attend school and, the few that do, only study until the age of 8 or 9. After that they start working to earn money for their families. Only 12 children from the entire slum are in their final year of school. Monica, one of these few, says, "I don't have a father, but my mother is a brave woman. She works all day so that I can attend school. I feel sad and want to make sure that her sacrifice is not in vain. But I realise that she is old and can't continue working such long hours. I really wanted to go to college, but I must be responsible, give up my dream, and start work to support her".

On the left is a photograph of what remains of the septic tank of the community toilet. The surface is not cement – it's rotting faeces. The residents are forced to cross the nearby railway tracks when they need to defecate and lives have been lost.

Most people who pass by the slum turn the other way and pretend that it doesn't exist. But it does. It's all real. And about 15,000 people live there.

At Asha we believe that the people of Peera Garhi deserve hope for a brighter future and we're grateful for any help you can give to make this happen. If you would like to help us take care of the people in Peera Garhi slum, please visit www.asha-india.org and donate online.

Staff Profile – Sweeta Jacob

'A timid and nervous girl, with no idea of the way the world works, unable to catch a bus, new to Delhi and scared of the slums' – this is how Sweeta describes herself in October, 1989, when she began working for Asha. "All I had", Sweeta says, "was a strong desire to help the poor and oppressed. And Asha seemed like the right place."

"I clearly recall my first day in Bapu Dham, the slum I began work in. Dr. Kiran had advised me to take the time to get to know the people and begin to build relationships with them. I thought to myself, 'How will I begin a conversation with them? What if they ask me to mind my own business?' A few hours later, I had gathered the courage to go to the first slum hut, peep inside, and say 'hello'. That was how my journey with Asha started – with a soft, almost inaudible, 'hello!'"

Sweeta's enthusiasm and willingness to embrace any challenge that has come her way coupled with the training and support she received from Dr. Kiran Martin, the Founder of Asha, has transformed her from a shy girl to a leader thousands of people look up to. Slum dwellers have opened their hearts and the doors to their slum huts to her as a result of her willingness to serve and her humble spirit.

"20 years later, when I think about my first day in an Asha slum, I have difficulty believing how far I've come – the millions of 'hellos' I've said, the way I've been welcomed, the thousands of people I've been able to help through Asha, the lives transformed, and the love that has been shared. It's been an absolutely incredible journey with Asha and I've loved every bit of it. I look forward to the next 20 years." When asked how she feels about getting the responsibility of transforming lives in Peera Garhi, Sweeta replies, "I'm so excited – so much needs to be done in Peera Garhi. The bigger the challenge, the greater the joy of accomplishment - I'm ready for Peera Garhi".

Sweeta supervises over the work Asha does in 17 slums. All of us feel fortunate to have Sweeta in our team and we'd like to express our heartfelt thanks to her for her selfless devotion to our work. All the best Sweeta.



Kiran's letter

My dear friends,

3000 families live in Peera Garhi slum in houses made of cardboard and discarded material. 6-8 persons share the only room they have. Thousands of people go to public toilets piled high with rotten faeces. They quench their thirst with muddy water contaminated with excreta and teeming with germs. Little children with bulging eyes, sunken cheeks and protruding ribs are a common sight. They are hungry and ill most of the time, many dying young. Parents cannot afford to buy enough food. They are at the mercy of employers who pay them appallingly low wages for dangerous work.

Stories of husbands beating their wives mercilessly, often in a drunken state, abound. The women look pale and tired of life. The residents are terrorised by the slum lord against whom they dared not raise their voices. He looks fearful, formidable and powerful. They live in constant dread of the bulldozers that can arrive at any time to turn their homes into rubble in an instant.

In my 21 years in the slums, I have come to understand that justice is fundamental to the holiness of God. God himself is the ultimate power and authority in the universe, and he wants power and authority to be exercised in conformity with his standards of moral excellence. The use of power by the strong to abuse the weak strikes at the very core of his being. God cannot accommodate himself to the idea of injustice. While we may have grown numb to much of the brutal abuse in our world, God has a deep hatred for injustice.

We must also remember that injustice is forceful and committed, and it therefore thrives on moral weakness and failure to commit. In each instance, injustice will prevail against the uncertain and the uncommitted. The oppressor is fully aware that his success depends on most people doing nothing. The sheer inertia and inaction of people makes him look much stronger than he really is.

In the midst of the world of brutal poverty and relentless oppression in the Peera Garhi slum, I feel called by God to become a force for His love and justice, to bring His limitless goodness into their lives, to radiate his warmth, his healing and his tenderness to them. I want to show them that life's battles are won, not by the strong and fast, but by those whose hope is in the God who created them, and in Him, they are stronger than the mightiest.

I ask for your generous help and your prayers so that my team and I may become equipped to begin our task. I am most grateful to all of you for your long years of friendship and support. With warm wishes.



Dr. Kiran Martin in Peera Garhi

Dr Kiran Martin
Director & Founder

News in Brief

VOLUNTEERS AND VISITORS

Members from Yeovil Community Church, St Stephen's Church, Twickenham, St Timothy's Church, Sheffield, City Life Church, Southampton, and a team of builders from various churches in Ballymena, NI, spent time working in and decorating Asha centres all over the city.

Prof Suzanne Crowe from Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia, and a group from Columbia Business School visited Asha slums to study the Asha model.

Dr. Richard Hogben, a GP from Yeovil, took a health seminar for Asha doctors and nurses.

Nigel Rees, a senior banker from HSBC in the UK, spent time understanding the various aspects of Asha's loan scheme and suggested ways to improve.

HOME FOR THE HOMELESS

Though most of the residents of Thokar No 8, the slum that was demolished as part of the urban renewal process related to the Commonwealth games, have been resettled in Savda Ghevra, a few old and destitute people remain homeless.

We'd like to thank the Ballymena Builders for constructing a house for Mustaq Ahmed, one of these few.

DR. MARTIN'S TRIP TO THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Dr. Martin was very warmly received and spoke at a large number of meetings in Ireland. Among the many she met were Minister Peter Power, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Republic of Ireland, Jeffrey Donaldson, MP at Westminster and Bishop Harold Miller of the Church of Ireland. Dr. Martin thanks all the people of Ireland for their most generous hospitality.

FAREWELL ALEX

Alex Arnold, a Consultant from the UK, had originally planned to work in the promotions department at Asha for a year, but the people of India, Asha and the slums made her stay so special that she decided to stay on. Three years later she left with a heavy heart.

All of us would like to thank Alex for all she did for Asha. All the best for all you do, Alex. We will always remember you.

ANTI SMOKING / DRINKING RALLY

Even though the oldest members of the Bal Mandals are only 14 years of age, they have a significant role in dealing with social problems. In Feb, Bal Mandal members from all Asha slums staged a rally against smoking and alcohol.

Children held colourful placards prepared by them and shouted anti-smoking and anti-drinking slogans. The air was charged with excitement. After completing a round of their slums, groups made their way back to the Asha centre with at least double the number of people they left with. In some of the slums, members of the 'Alcoholics Anonymous' groups also joined in. Promises to quit were made that we hope are kept.

BRITISH ARMY BAND PERFORMS FOR SLUM DWELLERS

In March, eight members of the British Army Band performed Scottish dances and played for the Asha staff and slum dwellers. The crowd loved every bit of the 40-minute performance.

Calculators, pens, pencils and caps donated by the British High Commission were distributed to the slum children after the event.

SEE ASHA VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE!

We're continually posting more videos on YouTube:
visit www.youtube.com and search for "Asha Society" to see Asha's work past and present.

Visit the Asha website at: www.asha-india.org

Sushila's Story

"I can see the joy in their eyes every time I go to my village. I love the way they introduce me to their friends – as if I'm their son! ... so proud to be my parents, just as I'm proud to be their daughter. There is much that I can do and they know that!", affirms Sushila.

Ever since she was 6, Sushila started taking care of her 7 younger siblings. Both her parents were daily wage labourers who at times had no work. "My oldest memories are of being a scared and troubled child – scared because of the money lenders who would scream and demand money from my parents and troubled because my siblings would cry because they were hungry. My parents were helpless. After a long days work, they'd come home tired and cook whatever little there was. When there wasn't enough food, they'd say that they were going out for a meal. I'd follow them quietly and hear them console each other. My mother often cried. They were so physically weak – I wondered if they ate at all and felt responsible", recalls Sushila.

"I was married when I was 9," she continues. "A girl child was considered a curse back then and it was normal for a girl to get married at that age. Though my partner is a great husband, at 9 you cant really appreciate that. I was confused about what to do most of the time".

"... but all that is past, now I'm in control of my life", she smiles a confident smile and continues, "Asha means 'hope' to others, but to me it means so much more - Asha is the answer to every prayer I prayed for the first 20 years of my life".

"I was illiterate, but my children who were members of the Bal Mandal and women from the Mahila Mandal at Asha taught me how to read and write. Being accepted in the Mahila Mandal made me feel wanted and gave me the confidence to do my own tailoring business. Asha helped me get a low interest loan to buy two sewing machines for my business. All my children go to school and the staff at Asha helped my oldest daughter, Santosh, get admitted in Maitreyi College, Delhi University. For so many years my whole world was limited to the four walls of my room, but, because of Asha, I realised that there is so much to learn, so much to see, so much to appreciate ... I was blind and I'd like to thank Asha for teaching me how to see."



The Home Minister of India, Mr P. Chidambaram, Distributes Loan Cheques to Asha Slum Dwellers

In June 2008, Mr P Chidambaram, then the Finance Minister of India (now the Home Minister) in his speech at the inauguration of the Microcredit scheme said, "... about 4 million people in Delhi are financially excluded – they do not have a bank account, they cannot avail a loan from a bank, they cannot get any financial services. In India roughly half are financially excluded ... even the very poor are entitled to a life of dignity and respect, and that can come if banks reach out to them". He then went on to explain the scheme in detail – a 10% rate of interest (opposed to roughly a 120% rate of interest that slum dwellers were paying moneylenders), and a discount of 1% if loan installments are paid on time. "This is an experiment – I'm relying on Dr. Kiran Martin to make this scheme a success", he continued. "We must together make this scheme a success and I will expand it to other parts of Delhi and then to India".

Almost 2 years later, on 6th Jan, 2010, Mr P Chidambaram once again was the Chief Guest at a loan distribution ceremony for slum dwellers organised by Asha in collaboration with national banks. The smile on his face said it all. The loan scheme had been a huge success!

"Who would have thought 2 years ago that if you gave money to Mehfooz Ali, he would repay it?", asked Mr Chidambaram. He mentioned things that Mehfooz, one of the loanees, could have done with the loan money and said how, instead, Mehfooz had bought a vehicle, started a business, sent his daughter to an English medium school, and more than tripled his income. Mr. Chidambaram spoke of how certain aspirations reside in the heart of everyone in India, rich or poor, and the only difference between them is that the rich have opportunities that the poor do not.

After his speech, Hon'ble Mr. P Chidambaram along with Dr. Kiran Martin, Founder and Director of Asha, Mr. K. R. Kamath, Chairman and Managing Director of Punjab National Bank, HE Mr. Peter Varghese, Australian High Commissioner to India, and Mr. K. S. Mehra, Commissioner, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, distributed loan cheques to sample of the borrowers on the stage as the Asha staff, bankers and hundreds of slum dwellers from all over the city cheered.

In under two years, loans amounting to 18 million rupees have been distributed through Asha's collaboration with national banks to slum dwellers all over the city. Loans for various purposes such as businesses, home renovation, higher education and purchase of two wheelers for independence in transportation were given out.

In the end Mr. Chidambaram congratulated Dr Martin and the Asha team as well as all the bankers for working tirelessly to make the scheme such a resounding success and demonstrating a fine example of financial inclusion to the entire nation. He finished by saying, "the work will never end, but we must not give up. We must continue to keep our faith in the poor, and that is the surest way that they can lift themselves up from poverty".



L-R – Mr. K. R. Kamath, Chairman and Managing Director of Punjab National Bank, Mr. P. Chidambaram, India's Home Minister and Dr. Kiran Martin, Founder and Director of Asha giving out loans to slum dwellers.



All of us at Asha would like to thank Mr. P Chidambaram, India's Home Minister, the 8 national banks and the Life Insurance Corporation of India that helped make the loan scheme possible, giving hope to those who need it most.



Visit the Asha website at: www.asha-india.org

Friends of Asha

If you want to contribute to the lives of poor slum dwellers in Delhi, then we suggest that you become a Friend of Asha. As a Friend of Asha we welcome you to join the Asha family that exists to help the downtrodden and oppressed live a life of dignity and hope. Friends of Asha make a huge contribution to our activities through donations, fundraising events, volunteering and raising awareness of our work.

Steven Faux from Bath made a CD called "The Psalms Project" and sent a donation to Asha from funds raised through sales of the CD. To listen to some sample tracks of the CD, please go to www.stevenfaux.com.

In January St Michael's Church, Bath, UK, held an open mic night in aid of Asha. Several talented musicians performed two or three numbers each, contributing to a wonderful evening's entertainment. The music varied in style from Folk to Pop, and from Jazz to Theatrical. James Faux and Phin Adams hosted the show, and during the interval Tegan Lloyd-Williams gave a short presentation on her time volunteering with Asha the previous month. About 50 people attended the event, and having been inspired both by the music and Tegan's moving powerpoint, they all gave generously. James Faux, Phin Adams and Emma Holland who were volunteering with Asha in Feb were able to pass on to Asha the amount raised.

There are all sorts of things you could do to raise funds for Asha. If you organise something interesting, please send us details and photos, and you may be in this space next time!

SUPPORTERS FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD CAN DONATE DIRECTLY TO US IN INDIA

Asha is registered to receive donations from overseas which means that we do not need to pay tax on any of your gifts. Sterling donations are acceptable, as are those in any other currency. If you'd like to make a valued contribution to our work, please fill in your details below, write a cheque made payable to "ASHA SOCIETY" and post it to us at this address:

The Administrator, Asha Society, Ekta Vihar, RK Puram Sector 6, New Delhi - 110022, INDIA.

Posting named cheques to India is a perfectly safe and secure method of making your donation. Please be assured that you will not incur any bank charges when donating directly to Asha in India.

Yes, I want to become a 'Friend of Asha'

- My contribution of _____ is enclosed.
- I would like to become a Hope Giver and contribute _____ every month. My first contribution is enclosed. Please send me a standing order form.
- I particularly want to contribute towards _____
- Please keep me informed about **Asha's** activities. My email is _____

Full name & title _____ Organisation (if any) _____

Address _____

City _____ Postcode _____

County _____

Only if you wish to Gift Aid your donation:

Please make your cheque payable to "Friends of Asha, GB" and mail to: Phil Leighton, Coordinator, Friends of Asha, (GB), Woodlands, 34 Knoll Road, Sidcup, Kent DA14 4QU, UK. Email: foasha.leighton@tiscali.co.uk Charity Registration No. 1085071

ASHA CURRENCY CONVERTER

- **£20** - will provide full medical care and vaccinations for a child's first year of life
- **£50** - will provide course books for a college student for 2 years
- **£100** - will provide the treatment needed to put 10 TB patients on the road to recovery
- **£100** - will pay for books for a 16-year old until he/she finishes school
- **£180** - will pay to train a CHV and equip her for 1 year
- **£500** - will cover university course fees for 3 years

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