

NEWS

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for friends of asha

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

Empowering Women



Mahila Mandal women work together to improve their communities

Empowering slum women is some of Asha's most critical work. Traditionally these women have been oppressed not only by poverty and a lack of education but by a patriarchal society in which women are dismissed to the spheres of home and family. Asha seeks to educate women about their legal and moral rights and to create communities where women are equal to men and where their opinions and leadership skills are recognised and respected.

Electoral Voice

India may be the most populous democracy on earth but for many slum women elections only mean an increase in coercion and corruption. The 3 million residents of Delhi slums comprise a voting block too powerful to be ignored by local politicians, yet unfortunately, many voters are unaware of their rights to free and fair franchise. While 90% of eligible adults in slums do vote (compared with 40% of the middle class), they are subjected to campaigns of bribery, intimidation and hollow promises by candidates and their parties. In theory, once elected the politicians should advocate for their constituents' needs but in reality many politicians use their improved status to advance their own cause while ignoring the plight of the poor.

During the December 2008 elections for the Delhi Assembly Asha worked to increase awareness of electoral rights among New Delhi slum residents. Women in particular were taught the value of their political voice and the importance of voting for candidates who will back up their promises with tangible actions. Through our women's associations (Mahila Mandals) Asha stressed that women have the right to cast their vote confidentially and that any electoral irregularities that they witness should be reported to the appropriate authorities.

As a result of their electoral education, the slum women Asha has worked with were determined not to be coerced but to choose the best candidate for their area. After casting their votes, slum women reported to Asha staff that since realising the power of their vote, they want to use the electoral process to their advantage by making specific demands of candidates and only voting for parties who have a track record of helping the poor.

Financial Independence

Being a poor woman in India comes with a myriad of disadvantages, not least a sense of unworthiness and embarrassment. When Asha first set members of our Mahila Mandals the challenge to fundraise on behalf of their groups we were met with much apprehension about having to approach people of a higher status. Over time however, we have witnessed a remarkable transformation as the women have overcome their hesitation and developed courage and boldness. *(Continued on p3)*

Surviving Winter

The weather in India is mostly remembered for the fierce heat of its summers. As a result, the unforgiving winter months are often forgotten. During the months of December and January, when temperatures fall to single digits, people living in makeshift slum housing have little protection from the elements.

Often owning only one set of clothes, winter is the most bitter season for slum residents. Children run around in bare feet while the adults try to stay warm by wrapping themselves in discarded fabric to keep out the cold. At night families huddle around open fires or coal burning stoves before going to sleep on the cold floor. Exposure such as this can lead to a number of illnesses and increases the mortality rate among the elderly and infirm.

To counter this, in December Asha identified the most vulnerable members of our slum communities to be the recipients of warm blankets, distributed free of charge. Elderly residents with no source of income and no family to take care of them were most often found to be in need, however blankets were also given to some families with young children and pregnant women.

These blankets can mean everything when it comes to survival during the winter season and were gratefully received by those who would have otherwise gone cold. If you would like to donate for the purchase of blankets please send a cheque to the address on the back page or visit our website www.asha-india.org.



A member of the Asha programme staff presents a blanket to a resident of Coolie Camp slum



Dr Martin at the November microfinance loan presentation

Dear Friends,

As I write this letter in the shadow of the terrorist attack on Mumbai on 26/11, I feel a great sense of sympathy for the families who lost loved ones. The lone terrorist, Kasab, who was captured, confessed that he came from a poor family and never knew the meaning of the word 'love'. He ran away from home and joined a terrorist organization that gave him a sense of belonging, a sense of identity and a sense of purpose, and seemed to him to fulfill his deepest cravings. How many terrible problems in relations between nations, classes and races in today's world arise from the sad deficiency of love! Are we not obliged to be concerned with the greatest need of our brothers and sisters, the need for love?

My dear friends, as Christmas approaches, I'd like to suggest that charity is not merely gentleness, kindness and affability. It is not enough to be charitable to our immediate neighbours, our family and friends, who share the same advantages and comforts as we do. Those who most need our love are the ones who are unfortunate, who suffer, who are poor, destitute, or who have nothing in this world and who therefore have a claim upon everyone else who has more than he

himself strictly needs. True love is not satisfying an inner need to 'do good', a moral luxury that gives us merit in God's sight. True love implies a deep concern for the needs of others. We are worthy human beings only when we give of our time, our possessions and our concern in order to help those less fortunate than ourselves. The sacrifice must be real, not just a gesture of lordly paternalism that inflates our own ego while patronizing the poor. The sharing of material goods must also be a sharing of the heart, a recognition of and identification with the misery and poverty of the unfortunate, the underprivileged, the dispossessed.

Token acts of mercy and symbolic acts expressing goodwill have no real effect in helping the poor; all they do is to tacitly condone injustice and help to keep people poor. In fact, we implicitly cooperate with evils that prolong or intensify suffering and poverty when we stay silent.

Our deep concern for social injustice must lead us to perform actions that participate in radically transforming the lives of the poor, so that the injustices and indignities they suffer will not have the last word.

Christ taught that we must all love one another as our own selves. To love another as oneself means to treat him as oneself, to desire for him everything that one desires for oneself; a relationship with God, a loving family, a safe, secure and comfortable home, good health, a good education, opportunities for dignified work, a desire for friendship, a need for human affection, recreation, rest and sleep – all that God has destined for every one of His creatures that He has made in His image.

I wish you all a wonderful Christmas season and a very Happy New Year, and I thank you for sharing my vision and for being such active partners with me in my work.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Kiran Martin
Founder & Director

News in Brief

VOLUNTEERS

A team from New Generation Church in Kent visited for three weeks, undertaking renovations at Asha's Seelampur Centre. The Ballymena Builders team returned for 9 days in October. They carried out extensive building works at Mayapuri, Jeevan Nagar and Zakhira slum colonies. The Rainey Endowed School sent a group of high school students and their teachers for a 9 day visit. While with us, the students painted murals at the Kusumpur Pahadi centre and spent time getting to know local children. In November, Sam Gibson led a team from Lincoln in the UK that renovated the Asha centre at Buland Masjid. Two occupational therapy students Preety Ghai and Lydia Pym taught English at Kusumpur Pahadi in November.

COMPUTER DONATION FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Stuart Polley, the Headmaster of Larne High School in Northern Ireland, who visited Asha in October with the Ballymena Builders team, presented computers to students Bablu and Rohit. The two boys are presently studying 3D Animation and Multimedia at the Arena Multimedia Institute thanks to Asha's career counseling initiatives. Members of the team from New Generation Church in Kent also donated a computer to Shiv, another student studying on the same course. Having witnessed their struggles and spent time motivating and encouraging them during their stay, Stuart and the New Generation team felt compelled to do something practical to support the students. For Bablu, Rohit and Shiv, who desperately needed personal computers to complete their studies, the gifts were invaluable.

EXPANSION OF YOUTH GROUPS

October saw the further development and expansion of youth work at Asha through the introduction of groups known as Yuva Mandals. These are an evolution of the adolescent groups that already operate in Asha slums. The Yuva Mandals will be comprised of post-Bal Mandal children in the 15-18 years age group. The Yuva Mandals aim to integrate community and environmental development with the existing health education projects run by the groups. They will work in conjunction with Asha's career counseling initiatives to help encourage our young people to pursue higher education.

CHRISTMAS PARTIES

Just before the Christmas break Asha was abuzz with activity as preparations were underway for the annual children's Christmas parties. As in past years, Asha held parties for Bal Mandal children at each of our centres. The parties were a celebration of another successful year within the Bal Mandals as well as giving the children the opportunity to partake in traditional Christmas festivities.

Each party featured great food, games, singing and dancing, with some groups also producing nativity plays for their appreciative audiences. Each child received a small gift from Asha in celebration of the Christmas season.

The parties gave the children a wonderful break from the difficulties of their everyday lives. The Bal Mandal children and all at Asha are very grateful to those who donated funds to support the parties.

Microfinance update



Mehfooz with the truck he purchased with a Canara Bank loan

importance of good saving habits and offered to set up bank accounts for anyone who applied, even if they were yet to have any savings to deposit.

Following the loan presentations, the banking executives met with some of the education loan recipients to discuss their academic progress.

In addition to bank loans, our teenage group members have been encouraged to open their own personal bank accounts. Fostering healthy saving habits from an early age has been a focus for our Team Leaders and it is hoped that by July next year each year 12 student will have saved Rs 7000-8000, to help meet their college expenses.

Mahesh's story

Having been denied the luxury of a suitable childhood Mahesh spent most of his time walking around aimlessly, playing in dirty drains and rubbish dumps, and making trouble. Mahesh often saw children assemble in a building every afternoon and he would wonder what they were up to, but he never bothered to find out. On one day, however, his curiosity got the better of him and he decided to see what the kids were doing inside the green building he passed by everyday. That was the first time he entered the Asha centre in the Dr. Ambedkar Basti slum.

With the help of the Asha staff in the slum, he was admitted to a government school. It turned out that he was a very bright boy. He was always in the top 3 students of the class! He started reading the books in the Asha library and learning computers in the Asha resource centre. Due to his educational gifts, commitment and desire to improve his situation, Asha decided to help Mahesh realise his dream of becoming an engineer.

In addition to paying his school fees and helping him with other expenses, Asha has been able to get Mahesh admitted to FITJEE, a special coaching institute for IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) which is the top engineering college in India. The fee for his coaching alone is Rs 146,000.

Mahesh wakes up at 5 AM, studies for an hour, cooks breakfast, attends school, then studies for a couple of hours. When he is finished studying he does his Bal Mandal work - he is the President of the Bal Mandal at Dr. Ambedkar Basti, cleans his house and cooks. He then teaches local students for a few hours to help his family and earn some pocket money. Finally he attends his FITJEE coaching, studies for his engineering entrance exam and goes to sleep at about 11:30 PM! He is a truly remarkable boy and all of us at Asha feel a great sense of pride in being able to support him to realise his dream.



Mahesh receives an educational loan from the Indian Finance Minister Mr P Chidambaram

Women's Empowerment continued from page 1...



A Mahila Mandal member helps administer a community saving scheme

The money will be used to make important changes to living conditions in the slum in areas such as sanitary services, fighting the prevalence of drugs and alcohol, Women's Empowerment programs or improved water services. The aim is to give the groups financial independence from Asha, creating sustainability for the future. In the long-term this may allow Asha to withdraw from the area with the confidence that the groups will continue to flourish.

The women have asked for donations from factory owners, successful business people and politicians from within their communities - local stakeholders who are morally responsible for looking after the poor. Having a strong belief in the cause they are fundraising for has been an important part of the process.

The Mahila Mandals are a great example of what can be achieved when women are brought together for a common cause. Whether helping the elderly and the ill, advocating education or raising awareness about human rights, the women of the Mahila Mandals are growing from strength to strength.

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.

A class of students from a school in Kent for children with autism, decided to raise money for Asha by doing a sponsored walk. They had learnt about the charity during class discussions with their teacher Sarah French, who is a past volunteer with Asha. All of the students worked extremely hard to raise the funds.

A cake sale raised £168.33 for Asha in a single Sunday at St. Stephen's Church, East Twickenham. The sale was held between and after church services during the day and was staged by Michael Wallace as part of his general fundraising prior to working in India as an Asha volunteer.

Through two Bhangra, Bollywood and Hip Hop nights held during the festival season of Diwali at Edinburgh University, the South Asian Students Association (SASA) raised funds for Asha in style! At the first evening a raffle was held and at the second, a portion of every ticket sold was donated to Asha.

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

- **£15** can buy a student stationery for one year
- **£30** can purchase course books for one year
- **£55** can provide a student with new clothes
- **£170** can cover university course fees for one year

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