

NEWS for friends of asha

Issue #45

January 2010

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

ASHA WISHES ALL ITS SUPPORTERS A HAPPY NEW YEAR!

India's Cabinet Minister for Education, Hon Mr Kapil Sibal, is welcomed at Asha

Hundreds of students from Asha slums eagerly heard all that India's Cabinet Minister for Education, Hon Mr Kapil Sibal, had to say to them about not letting anything get in the way of them realising their dreams. Mr Sibal spoke about how he had overcome many obstacles to become the Minister for Education as the children listened, spellbound.

Having heard about how Asha had been motivating and working with children from slums who are attending school and college, Mr Sibal was happy to have an extended question and answer session with them. The children described to him their harsh living conditions, their financial difficulties and the many hurdles they faced as they tried to get a college education. Mr Sibal was delighted to learn that so many slum children were studying a wide range of subjects in colleges of Delhi University as well as vocational training institutions. He paid tribute to all the students for their achievements and for their passionate desire to obtain a good education. Wholeheartedly congratulating Asha's work, Mr Sibal commented that

nobody else is working in the field of higher education. He asked Dr Martin to extend Asha's work to include his own constituency, and scale up her efforts to cover the entire city. His final words were, "All are born equal, the only thing that some people lack is opportunity - Asha is giving you those opportunities".



Mr Sibal, India's Cabinet Minister for Education, Dr. Kiran Martin, Asha staff and volunteers with some of the students

Usha – inspired by Mr Sibal, inspiring so many of her peers

Inspired by how Mr Sibal overcame his difficult circumstances, Usha happily affirmed, "If Mr Sibal can succeed, so can we". Usha, the Vice President of the youth group in one of Asha's slums, spoke on behalf of all her friends.

Since she first saw a reporter reading the news on TV, Usha decided that was what she was wanted to do. By the time she was 7, she realised that her dream was a bit too far-fetched. Her father, a gardener, was the only bread winner in their family of 6. There was no way he could pay for her education. "If the Asha staff hadn't explained to my parents the importance of education, they would have had me married by now. I would probably have a child as well!" Usha jokes.

"But now, with all support and guidance Asha is giving me, I feel confident that I will be a newsreader in a few years. Its not only the computer education, books and study guides that Asha gave me that made me feel confident and good about myself – the chance to be the President of the children's group has helped me a lot as well", she says. Usha continues, "I am so lucky- do you know I have three teachers teaching me English?"



Usha helping her younger brother with his homework

Imagine – I live in a slum but still Polly Ma'am (Mrs Polly Holborow, wife of the New Zealand High Commissioner) comes to teach us", adding "... and Jan Ma'am (volunteer Mrs Jan Hooper) is such a good teacher as well. These days Jan Ma'am is helping us with a play about the importance of education for the girl child".

"Yes, yes, I'll go to college to study journalism – there are so many others from my slum that Asha is sending for higher education. My younger brother will go to college. Everyone will go to college", Usha replies when asked about what she thinks about going to college. "After graduating, I'll write for a newspaper to gain some experience before I become a newsreader. I want the world to know that slum children who do well in school, do well even though they face so many challenges. If given a fair chance we can do better than anyone else. My first article will explain this".

"With Asha on our side, we can... we must", she stops to consider for a few seconds before exclaiming, "We will. Yes. We most certainly will!".

After being welcomed into a cosy and spotless living room, sinking into comfortable chairs and being given platefuls of fragrant and steaming South Indian food and cakes, Asha staff and visitors would not have recognised the house as once being part of a slum.

Beaming with pride, two generations of women explained to the visitors how they came to live in such a nice home, while the younger woman's daughter chatted in English to a staff member. Usha owns the house, and she has rights to the land on which it is built. The building has two storeys, running water, a high ceiling, and is carpeted. The room is a dramatic contrast to the dark, cramped and bare surroundings of most slum huts – many of which make it impossible for someone of average height to stand up straight.

Outside, the pavements are swept, drains are completely covered, and small businesses thrive in the lanes.

It was a true privilege to visit the community of Shanti Vihar and to see just how much things can change when a community works hard to make the most of the opportunities they are given.

Even long-term Asha staff members were startled to see just how different the area is than any typical slum. Asha started work in Shanti Vihar in 1991, when the conditions were as squalid, deprived and overcrowded as in any other slum colony. After Asha's training began and they gained knowledge and skills, the members of the Mahila Mandal eagerly embraced their new responsibilities, and delighted in each small triumph and step forward that they achieved. Asha's housing project enabled the people of Shanti Vihar to gain land rights, giving them an extra reason to improve their homes and make their community a better place to live.

By 2007, it was clear that the community were self-sufficient, and no longer needed Asha's input on a regular basis. These days, residents may visit Asha's polyclinic for medical treatment, and Mahila Mandal members can come to Asha for refresher training, but they are a very capable group, able to visit any government department independently.

Today, living in such good conditions, the community of Shanti Vihar no longer have to suffer the hardships of a slum environment, or the feeling that they are second-class citizens. Gaining the confidence and the knowledge to make changes for themselves was the first step – now, a whole new generation is growing up in a safe, clean community, with few of the disadvantages experienced by their parents. Shanti Vihar is a shining example of just how effective on-site slum development can be, and we look forward to seeing many more colonies transformed in just the same way.



L-R: Netherlands Ambassador HE Mr Bob Hiensch and his daughter Caroline, Mahila Mandal members Usha, Meena and Kalyani, Asha staff member Mrs Rani Kumar and Dr Kiran Martin in Shanti Vihar

News in Brief

VOLUNTEERS AND VISITORS

Tom and Linda Speir, Tegan Lloyd-Williams and Taylor Southwood and Simon Colville, all from the UK, taught children English between September and December. In addition, a team from Global Generation led by Mike Andrea visited to renovate a resource centre. We're very grateful to all volunteers for their hard work and enthusiasm. Leader of the Opposition, Upper House, Hon Mr L K Advani visited Asha, as did HE Mr Peter Varghese, Australian High Commissioner to India.

INTER-AREA CRICKET MATCH

As part of the exchange programme between the Bal Mandal groups, a cricket match was organised between Mayapuri and Seelampur in November. It was an exciting day out for the children as they competed to outclass each other, and also a great day for sharing and learning from each others' experiences. The match ended with Mayapuri walking away with the title, and the children from Seelampur are keen to have a rematch in 2010!

DR KIRAN MARTIN IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Dr Kiran Martin will be visiting Northern Ireland from 24th - 31st January 2010. Anyone who wishes to meet her or would like to know where she will be speaking can contact Gordon Wright on 02890 427201 or at gwg70@yahoo.com.

SPECIAL GUESTS AT ASHA CHRISTMAS PARTY

Asha's first Christmas celebration in the slums started with a big bang! Dr. Kiran Martin and members of the Asha staff were joined by HE Mr Bob Hiensch, the Ambassador of The Netherlands to India, and HE Mr Rupert Holborow, the New Zealand High Commissioner to India, for Christmas celebrations in Mayapuri. As usual, children in all slum areas also got to enjoy a Christmas party and gift – thank you to all our supporters who contributed this year.

DIWALI MADE BRIGHTER FOR THE ELDERLY

Members of the Bal Mandal in Seelampur showed initiative as well as generosity when they made clay lamps to sell during the Diwali festival, using the money they made to decorate the homes of local elderly people and give them gifts of sweets.

Asha – The Only Hope For Some Elderly People in Slums

Langu and Meera, both 75, have 7 children and 24 grandchildren, but have still been deserted in their old age. The grief has left Langu mentally confused. Their only shelter is a roof supported by just 2 walls, and they spend all their time there as Meera is paralysed. Although their children haven't visited for years, in his confusion Langu assures Meera that their children will bring them food and medicines. Langu says, "My children take such good care of me – they are doing so well for themselves". He continues, "Look - they are coming to help my wife Meera, who is not keeping well".

Asha staff members bathe Meera, and bring food, clothes, gifts and medicines for them. The Bal Mandal children spend time with them and decorate their house for festivals.



Without the women's and children's groups and the Asha staff, Langu, Meera and so many other elderly people deserted by their families would have died uncared for years ago. Apart from the practical help they get, the love they receive keeps them alive. Upon seeing someone from the Asha centre approach their hut, Langu's face lights up as he says to Meera, "Wake up dear, look, our children are here again!".

There are many elderly people like Langu and Meera who have nobody else to turn to this winter. If you would like to help us take care of them by donating money for food, blankets and other necessities, please visit www.asha-india.org to donate online.



Dr. Kiran Martin, other Asha team members and hundreds of slum dwellers warmly welcomed the First Lady of Japan, Mrs Miyuki Hatoyama and a large Japanese delegation of diplomats and senior Government officials on 29th December.

Dr Martin introduced Mrs Hatoyama to a group of slum women and children who proudly described to her how they had been working hard to make their slum community a better place to live in. She was particularly impressed by the fact that even though the slum dwellers live in conditions of harsh poverty, they were determined to bring about change in themselves and in their community. The First Lady praised the college going children for fighting their circumstances and finally getting places at university. She warmly encouraged them to study hard and seize the opportunities they had received through Asha.

The First Lady also spent time visiting families and understanding the various aspects of the Asha model of urban poverty alleviation. She described the work of Asha as remarkable and transformational, and said that she was proud that the Japanese Embassy and Asha are working together in partnership.

A story of hope from one man battling an alcohol addiction

When he first met Jez, Rangilal hadn't had a drink in 2 days. This was the best he had done in over 30 years. "I've been drinking since I was very young – 6 or 8", said Rangilal. "My parents drank and fought, I cried, and my parents gave me some locally-made whisky so that I'd shut up and sleep".

It's a warm day, but the craving for alcohol makes Rangilal shiver and occasionally break down in tears as he recalls the horrors of the dark years he spent under the influence of alcohol. His father died when he was young, leaving him to look after his mother and 11 sisters. "I was only a child, and we had no money", he recalls. "Payments for all our loans were long overdue, money lenders kept threatening us. I would run away from home and try to drink my worries away, but my family needed me, so I always went back. But I couldn't stop thinking about when I could next drink - it was like a nightmare".

Hoping to inspire alcoholics to conquer their addiction, Jez Etherington from Twickenham in the UK, linked the Delhi Alcoholics Anonymous group with the Asha centres at Mayapuri and Zakhira 2 years ago and those areas now hold regular meetings. Rangilal joined the meetings and was glad of the support. "When I returned home sober for the second consecutive evening, my sisters were so surprised!", Rangilal smiles. "They had begged me to stop drinking. I was finally encouraged and decided to face the challenge head on. I took up a job as a guard at night and collected and sold scrap during the day." About a year later, Rangilal saved enough to buy his own balloon-making machine. His balloons were a big hit with the local children.

Now a proud man, he announces, "I have only one more moneylender left to pay, and that is a just small amount." With Asha's help, Rangilal applied for a loan to open a small balloon factory; the loan was approved and India's Home Minister presented him with the cheque at an Asha ceremony on 6th January. Rangilal can't control his excitement. When asked why he decided to have a balloon factory, Rangilal grins, "I've spent so many years in darkness, I thought it was time to add some fun and colour to the world".



We're grateful to Jez for his interest in starting and supporting this initiative, and hope to see more people turn their lives around in future – Rangilal proves that it is possible!

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.

Mickey and Eleanor Robertson from Edinburgh in Scotland, are raising funds for Asha on an ongoing basis, using their skills and those of family members. Eleanor says, "It all began with a swatch of sample fabrics – really good quality fabric in varying sizes – "Free to a good home" the sign said. So I gave the fabric a good home.

I came up with the idea of making it into bags of varying kinds and sizes, depending on the size and type of fabric – shopping bags, book or magazine bags, evening bags. Once I'd made them, friends wanted to buy them. Then the inspiration came to sell them for Asha funds.

With each bag we gave a little leaflet explaining why they were made, telling a little about Asha and giving the website contact. Hopefully, some will want to find out more, go to the website and become Asha supporters themselves. The idea is spreading and my daughter is making jewellery, my daughter-in-law cushions, so by next autumn who knows where we will be going!"

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.

Alternatively, you can visit www.asha-india.org/HowYouCanHelp/Giving.aspx to donate online in a choice of currencies.

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