

Ek Chotisi Asha

“I live in a village about 17 km from my school. Thanks to the Jeep provided by you, I can now go to school without much hassle”. These are the words of an adivasi girl in 6<sup>th</sup> standard. Her school is supported by Asha for Education (Asha), organization that supports basic education of underprivileged children in India. I have been volunteering for the Colorado chapter of Asha for last 10 years. Our chapter raises more than Rs.10,00,000 a year in donations and supports 5-6 projects in various parts of India. But it was not always like that...

I remember the day Three young people, who had just arrived in Denver for job, met one evening to talk about social work and how it could bring change in India. India is usually the subject of conversation in most of the Indian parties in the US and most of those conversations are about how bad things are in India and in recent years, how things are changing in India. But this group wanted to do something and not just talk about it. All discussions concluded that the education of underprivileged children is the core factor that can catalyze the socio-economical change in India. India has a bright future but only if all Indians get opportunity to work to their potential and the best way to provide that opportunity is by providing education. And that's how the Colorado chapter of Asha was born.

Currently there are 66 chapters of Asha worldwide including many in the US, Europe, Singapore, Australia and India. The organization has more than 1000 active volunteers and several thousand supporters around the world. Asha has disbursed more than \$4 million dollars so far in India for the cause of education. The basic mode of Asha is very simple. Each chapter of Asha raises money through the donors and supports the educational projects implemented by the NGOs in India. For example, Asha Colorado raised \$500 in the first year by selling t-shirts, caps, and coffee mugs. Next year, we organized a musical program performed by local band and raised \$6,000. The year after, we organized a 5K walk to raise \$8,000....and that continued. As we got more recognition, many people started donating through their company's matching donation program. Some donate through the automatic deduction of donation to Asha from their paycheck. What donors like about Asha is the transparency we provide in channeling funds to the projects and also the fact that Asha is zero overhead organization – that means every \$ donated goes directly to the cause of education in India.

Asha is different than many other charities working on social issues in India. The asha volunteers - all of whom have full-time jobs, raise funds for the education of underprivileged children in India and then make the decision on how that funding is utilized. There are many charities where the decisions are taken by some higher committee. But we wanted to be involved in that decision and also be involved in selecting the projects that we fund. It was also important for us from the beginning to support the small NGO that do not have the reach or support of the large donors, the ones who will continue their work even without any support, who do not have MSW but have

intense motivation to make the difference. Those became the basic principles of our operation.

Someone told me before going to the US that you will become patriotic after living abroad. I did not believe him then but he was so right. I was born and brought up in a middle class neighborhood of Mumbai near Shivaji park. Being Alumni of Balmohan Vidyamandir and IIT Bombay, my experience growing up with social work was limited to writing answers to civics science class. Somehow the middle class parents of my generation were so focused on setting the individualistic goals of becoming engineer and doctor that they forgot to talk about the social work that their parents did and generations before did who took part in the freedom movement. Somehow it seemed like government's problem. There was no concept of empowering people to solve their problems but to look at government for solving all the ills of the society. Eg While in IIT, we were supposed to teach the kids from the slums near IIT but most of the kids used to stop showing up halfway into the semester..it didn't bother me but that changed after going to America. Somehow there was the urge to help your countrymen and help the children who are not privileged as we were.

Some of the biggest achievements of the Colorado chapter are construction of school for the mentally handicapped children in Tamilnadu with the help of donation from the Western Union Foundation. Similarly, Asha is supporting construction of brand new education institute in Karnataka with the help of a private donor. A project in Karnataka that Asha supported for many years has got government funding now and does not need support. But what is important is not the scale of the project, but the impact of the project. When a young NGO leader in rural Maharashtra solves a problem of a farmer through the 'Right to Information' campaign, ...Or getting a letter from a Adiwasii girl in Tamilnadu thanking for our donation that provides her transportation to get to the school that is 17 km from her home.... that's the real impact ...one child at a time.

Our relationship with the NGOs is the most important factor of this success. We support projects based on the trust and dedication of the people and not on the fancy letterheads and persistent phone calls. In fact, there is an instruction booklet in circulation in UP on how to apply for funds to Asha. It is very easy to come up with the receipts in India...so the only way to work with an organization is based on the trust. We also perform unannounced site visits to make sure the organization is functioning as promised and the benefits are reaching out to the people. We stopped funding to few organizations when site visit report was not satisfactory. Asha is a very small organization compared to many others that fund projects in millions in India. But we are happy to be small and working with the people who need help. Most of the organizations that we fund are referred to us by our volunteers or through the existing NGO partners. For example, we are supporting the organization Ajol that was highlighted in this newspaper few months back and was introduced to us by a media advocacy group, Sampark. The internet provides us a medium to network with the organizations to connect a donor in the US with a child in Array colony that needs help going to school.

The volunteers of Asha are the backbone of our success. Some of the working principles of Asha are unique compared to other charities such as principles of equality of members, office bearers are coordinators and responsible for tasks than positions, decision by consensus. Because of this, we attract people from all walks of life who are interested in making a difference and less in organizational politics and fight over positions. I have developed friendship with Asha volunteers for many years and we have become life long friends on personal level. There are also many who joined Asha with the hope of social networking and stop coming to meeting when they figured out that being asha volunteer means working for the cause of education. But we also have some Asha volunteers who found their sole mates and now both husband and wife are Asha volunteers. The transient nature of the Asha volunteers also poses the biggest challenge of running a volunteer organization like Asha. Most of the volunteers join Asha when they are young, unmarried, have a new job and have time at hand and want to make a difference. But that demography changes in 3-4 years when people move, change jobs, get married, have kids, (or have twins like we did), get promotions, start traveling and what not. But we are also always on the lookout to recruit new volunteers so the work continues.

It is very important to note that what Asha does is very small compared to the NGOs that we support in India. These are the people who make the upliftment of society the cause of their life and sacrifice the materialistic ambitions that we all harbor. They are the real heroes and our society needs to recognize their efforts and contributions. They are the “khadi” in the movie Traffic Signal who work in our slums and convince mothers to send their kids to school; they are the ones who teach after school classes to help with the education. They are the ones who run government schools in remote Maharashtra where government teachers are not willing to travel. They are the ones who make the real difference. Asha plays an important role in providing support to them and be the bridge between donors who want to make the difference and those who are making the difference. Social development of India is a team effort and we all have a role to play.



Children Performing at an Asha Fund-raising Event



Asha Volunteers with Co-founder Sandeep Pandey



Asha Volunteer Team after a successful fund-raiser



Asha Volunteer talking to a potential donor