



Dishaa

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Issue 31

The Association for India's Development (AID) Newsletter

RURAL LIVELIHOODS

Kirankumar Vissa (AID Maryland)

Why are they begging on the trains?

When you are traveling in India, you are invariably forced to ask yourself, "What do I do when someone comes to me begging on the street or in the train?" Many say that by giving them money, you are only encouraging them not to work for their living - that you are encouraging them to remain poor. But, are the people who say this doing anything that helps remove the poverty? Should we, instead, react with compassion and share whatever we feel like sharing? At least that will allow us to retain our human feeling. Meanwhile, one also wonders, "*Why are they going through this indignity? Why are they begging on the streets, in the trains?*"

When asked, "What is your policy of dealing with those who come to you begging?" Aravinda (AID-India) gave a thoughtful answer: "My policy of dealing with begging is to buy village-made products whenever possible." And at a fair price, she implicitly meant.

Beneath the surface evidence of the few who have settled for the indignity of begging, there lies the reality of hundreds of millions of Indians struggling to make a decent living, a large majority of them in the villages. The problem of the poor is largely the problem of their livelihoods. Are we ready to have a share in their problems? Are we ready to participate in positive efforts in this direction, through groups like AID? ***Are we ready?***

Rapaka women learn jute skills!

The main occupation in the Muslim hamlet of Rapaka (Srikakulam dist., AP) is stone cutting, and women traditionally have not gone out of the house to work. But, standing on the road next to Rapaka, one sees carts full of jute, recently harvested. Most of it is exported out of the state. Is there any local enterprise making jute products? No!

AID-India volunteers searched and discovered a single couple in the block who can make jute products. Ten women participated in a month-long training arranged by AID-India and GRASS. Now these women, in a cooperative effort, make

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DOWRY: An Evil Lurking Behind Tradition

Vaijayanti Gupta (AID San Diego)

Amongst a myriad of issues that affect gender equality in India, the tradition of dowry in weddings penetrates deep into every section of Indian society, irrespective of religion, caste or economic status. While the failure to fulfill dowry directly claims approximately 25000 lives of women in India every year, its indirect effects kill many more through practices such as female infanticide and abortion of female fetuses. The latter serve as preventive measures for families who potentially "go broke" trying to meet dowry demands at their daughters' weddings. While stories of brides being killed for not meeting dowry requirements make newspaper headlines, countless women unnoticed by society, suffer domestic violence, emotional taunts, and threats of divorce as a consequence of dowry.

Sadly, though education and financial independence helps in the empowerment of women, they alone will prove inadequate in eradicating this practice. An important reason why we chose to address this issue in AID is because we ourselves are not far removed from it. Among the well-educated and well-employed worldwide, the NRI community in the US comprises the highest bidders of dowry amongst Indians. An NRI groom's demands can often exceed 15000 to 20000 US dollars.

Many different issues came to our mind when we started this campaign. What should be considered dowry? Who is to be blamed for this practice - men, older women or the patriarchal society? Or the growing fad for materialistic gains that also manifests itself at various levels like corruption? Dowry affects men as much as women, for example, when fathers and brothers sell their property and spend their life's savings to get their daughters and sisters married. Do we fear to break this evil practice, which garbs itself as tradition? Or is it lack of information on what alternatives exist that prevents us from taking a step?

Our campaign against dowry has multiple objectives. It intends to go deep into the root of the problem and understand why this evil practice has been preserved in our culture in the name of tradition. It aims to question our own lifestyle and raise awareness so that we "practice what we preach". We will directly attack this practice at the level of various institutions, and provide information to people on how they can participate (dowry free weddings, publicity, etc). Lastly, we aim to provide information on existing dowry laws and support structures for dowry victims. Through this campaign, we wish to expose the ugly face of dowry and de-glamorize the tradition, as a step towards gender equality.

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ANTI-DOWRY TASK FORCE: A New Focus Group in AID *Savita Kini (AID Bay Area)*

On a trip to the Narmada Valley with dear Aravinda, in May of 2000, we were talking about our pet peeves on women's issues, ranging from dowry and relationships within our families to the prejudices we have been taught to grow up with; often bringing out our own hypocrisy. We planned to start a focus group for women's issues to facilitate open discussions and sensitize ourselves to many subtle issues of discrimination. The AID conference in 2000 was our first experiment. Mythily Sivaraman, secretary of All India Democratic Women's Association gave an inspiring talk that made us question our personal prejudices. After a first round of follow-up discussions, several volunteers came together on an email discussion forum. Along with my friends, Vajayanti Gupta and Neerja Bhatt, we conducted a survey that revealed many interesting viewpoints about AID's attitude to these issues. At the 2001 AID conference, a separate forum for discussing women's issues was created. We invited Mallika Dutt, lawyer, human rights activist, and founder of Sakhi, a south Asian Domestic Violence Support group. Her talk sparked lot of debates, discussions, and stories, including the despair of many volunteers at being unable to deal with family pressures and prejudices. Many wanted to break the status quo and take a stand. This led to the forming of a dedicated group of volunteers across AID who wanted to make a commitment to the cause for real gender equality within AID, our families, our friends and community.

This group has started with attacking dowry, an omnipresent social evil in the marriages of our society, which cuts across class and caste barriers. We started a discussion about an anti-dowry pledge and it was well received by members of the AID and ASHA communities across the US. Some of the group members also started a separate site for covering women's issues on IndiaTogether (<http://www.indiatogether.org/women/issues.htm>) to cover profiles of NGOs we work with, articles, debates and discussions. Subsequently, partnerships will be formed with women's NGOs that are working to eradicate dowry as well as those that provide support to women victims of dowry, domestic violence and other forms of assault.

In the months and years to follow, I sincerely hope that each of us are able to grow in our commitments and in our obligations not just as a funding organization for women's NGOs, but also as contributors to society with real gender equality. I am grateful that I am a part of this process of social change.

Plans for the future: *To run this as an organized campaign, starting with our own lives, reaching our family and friends and gradually the Indian community here. People who support this can help us by*

- (i) *Taking an anti-dowry pledge (currently under formulation), popularizing it amongst friends and relatives, and adhering to it;*
- (ii) *Writing about dowry in Indian newspapers in the US and in India;*
- (iii) *Designing advertisements, cartoons, logos, T-shirts, banners and placing these in various newspapers, newsletters, web sites, TV channels (cable);*
- (iv) *Using the logo on family wedding invitations;*
- (v) *Registering weddings on the India Together "dowry free wedding" site, so that we can popularize the web site;*
- (vi) *Contributing a small part of their wedding expenses to various organizations fighting dowry in India;*
- (vii) *Sharing stories from one's own experiences (identities can be masked) to inspire others.*

For more information on this program, please contact Savita Kini (savitakini@yahoo.com) and Vajayanti Gupta (vajayantig@yahoo.com).

GUJARAT UPDATE *Priya Ranjan (AID Maryland)*

On behalf of AID, we thank our donors for their generous contributions towards the Gujarat earthquake relief fund. It is through this support that AID has managed to raise a sizeable fund of over \$400,000. We would also like to mention that all receipts for the donations (made through credit cards and checks) have been sent. If you have not received your receipt please call (888) TALK-2-AID or send an email to priya@isr.umd.edu.

AID has been focusing on rehabilitation and livelihood generation projects for the earthquake victims including those that the government machinery has still not managed to reach. We do not believe that mere short-term relief is the answer to this natural disaster, which is further complicated by the socio-economic and political dimensions. Long term sustenance and its benefits have played a central role in our approach to earthquake relief efforts

In order to mitigate the desperation of the people affected by the earthquake, AID had earlier disbursed around \$60,000 in immediate relief through various non-governmental organizations of repute. AID has sent an additional \$108,000 towards long term rehabilitation and livelihood generation activities such as housing reconstruction and vocational training activities of various kinds. AID is also considering another \$150,000 worth of projects for support.

The following are the projects that have been approved since our last update:

- SEWA - Maryland and Bay Area - construction of collapsed and damaged houses in Kutch, Surendranagar and Patan districts - \$10,000
- Ganatar - Charlotte and Cincinnati - construction of earthquake-resistant school and sanitary facilities in Odu village, Surendranagar district.- \$31,000
- MMPS - Dallas and Charlotte - construction of earthquake resistant hostel and school building in Maliya taluka, Junagadh district- \$6,861
- MARAG - San Diego and Atlanta - construction and operation of children's activity centers in Rapar taluka, Kutch district - \$13,000

One of the most encouraging developments for us has been the personal involvement of our volunteer Gautam Desai and his wife Dr. Urvi Desai. An engineer residing in the US, Gautam has been 'on the ground' to personally participate in the earthquake rehabilitation work in Gujarat. In addition, he is also working on the broader social issues such as human rights and transparent governance to ensure an equitable society. He has been deeply involved with an NGO forum called Lok Adhikar Manch, that has been demanding fair rehabilitation and relief packages on behalf of the people.

Sadly, however, government officials recently had attacked the Lok Adhikar Manch members who were protesting peacefully, with *lathi* charges and arrests, when they were trying to present the issues before the Gujarat government and demanding action from them. We strongly protest this kind of brutal violation of civil rights and the insensitive attitude of government towards people's needs. We urge you to join us in the protest by visiting <http://www.indiatogether.org/petitions/gujarat/quakefunds.htm> and sending an email to the chief minister.

Once more, we, at AID, appreciate the concern our donors have shown towards the victims and their families. More information can be found at <http://www.aidindia.org/gujarat/>.

RURAL LIVELIHOODS

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beautiful jute bags, tablemats and pot-hangers. They sell some locally, and the rest through AID volunteers and its Eco-Friendly Center.



Display of finished jute products made by the Rapaka women

Now, can they make a living? (Or, how much would you pay for this bag?)

A good-sized bag is made of about 80 meters of braid made of jute. A woman is paid 30 paise per meter and Rs.15 for assembling the bag. The jute, the colors and incidental expenses would add to another Rs.10. So, the woman could sell the bag for Rs.49, of which Rs.39 pays for her work – which took a day and a half. That is, Rs.26 per day – about half the minimum wage!

Now, if you buy this bag for Rs.75 at the AID Eco-Friendly Center, accounting for the transport and running costs, the woman would get just more than Rs.60 for it – of which Rs.50 is her earnings. That is still just more than Rs.30 per day.

So, what these women earn depends on how many people like us are ready to buy these products and what we are ready to pay!

SHOP WITH VISION:

If you or your family wants to link with rural enterprise, try AID's Eco-Friendly Center or Grameen Maitri Kendra.

Visit the Ecoshop website at <http://www.aidindia.org/ecoshop> or contact Ravi/Aravinda at aid@vsnl.com

The Bigger Picture...

Even when you visit villages in the very dry Deccan districts of A.P. or Maharashtra, the predominant occupation still remains agriculture. Almost 90% of the villagers are engaged in farming either in their own land or as labor in other lands. A majority of them are small and marginal farmers or the landless – living at the margin. Their life could be pushed into misery by any number of reasons – low rainfall, rains at the wrong time, the soil losing some fertility, or a fall in paddy or oilseed prices.

Redistributing land to the landless, improving the soil, increasing the productivity, increasing water availability – any effort that secures a better livelihood through agriculture makes a lasting impact on the people.

Sustainable farming... in ¼ acre! The Solapur Experiment

When I heard about the 10-guntha experimenters in Maharashtra, I was excited: 10 gunthas equals ¼ acre. The hypothesis is that this land is sufficient to meet the food requirement of a family of 5, using low-external input sustainable agriculture (LEISA). How is this possible?

I traveled to Solapur and met Mr. Balakrishna Renake. Their farm was the only visible green patch in a vast, otherwise barren stretch of land, where the annual rainfall is between 400 and 500 mm. In addition, the topsoil has been removed for brick-making. Soil conservation efforts and planting of trees over a few years set the stage for the 10-guntha experiment.

Common wisdom dictates that 2.5 acres of wetland or 5 acres of dry land produce enough income for a family. However, in this case, the purpose here is to produce food for consumption by the family and not primarily for selling. I was amazed at how this change in emphasis can revolutionize the approach to agriculture.

Far from growing the same crop over several acres, each guntha is used to grow a different crop. In fact, two gunthas are used for the fence, and one for the house! In the 7 remaining gunthas, I saw a delightful mix of vegetables, banana and papaya, fruit trees, cereals, pulses, spices, sugarcane, oilseeds, and even fodder and green manure! The plants in every part seemed just happy to produce, and in some cases the yield was 4 times that of a normal farm.

Now, the crowning fact is that the fertilizer and pest control was completely organic and produced on the same plot of land! The trees in the fence provide most of the biomass for composting to obtain the organic manure.

Balakrishna Renake belongs to a Denotified and Nomadic Tribe (DNT) community, and his vision is to settle several DNT families with such 10-guntha plots. Two days before I met him, there was a major workshop near his farm, where agricultural experts, government officials and people's organizations from across Maharashtra discussed the Solapur experiment, and how this could be taken up as a model for sustainable livelihoods for the landless tribals and Dalits.

Kirankumar Vissa spent a few weeks in India exploring efforts in sustainable agriculture, water and soil management, including the Solapur farm. AID is discussing a possible involvement with Mr. Renake's efforts.

A Unique Collaboration:

Kids for Kids Programme

Hrishi Shinde (AID Dallas)

A few months ago, AID Dallas supported a small orphanage in Dapodi, Pune, Maharashtra, named Saraswathi Anath Sikshan Ashram (SASA). The Ashram houses about 30 orphans from the ages of 5 to 17. At that time, a contribution towards the ashram was made by the DFW Maharashtra Mandal (DFWMM), a result of the community helping community plan that we in Dallas are working towards.

The Maharashtra Mandal and AID went one step forward by inaugurating a unique "kids for kids" program, at the recently held Sankranti festival. This is a novel program where children from the US interact with children in India, and support them in their educational needs. The children in the US were children of all ages in the DFWMM, and they would interact with the children in SASA.

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Kids for Kids Program

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The program is similar to a Pen Pal program, where additionally, each child in the US helps raise funds for a child (his/her pen pal) in India. Funds are collected with a Penny Drive, with the slogan, "Pennies for many... make someone's life Sunny". Penny Boxes have been distributed to the children and will be monitored and collected by AID volunteers at regular intervals. The children have also been given photographs of their pals in India, taken by the DFWMM president, on her visit to the orphanage. Communication between the kids (through photographs, letters, and email) will be facilitated by AID volunteers and local helpers in Pune.



Mr Surwase and his "children" at the Saraswati Anath Sikshan Ashram

The children showed a lot of enthusiasm when given the Penny Boxes and had a bunch of questions. Moreover, the adults also were very interested in the program! The results were overwhelming, with 60 boxes distributed. We hope that many of the needs of the kids will be fulfilled by the contributions from these Penny Boxes, and that the program proliferates into other communities as well.

Village Visits

Ravi Kuchimanchi

My favourite things...
the feeling of the reserved ticket
a train bound somewhere
space on the upper berth
treasured haunting memories
of people I did not meet
it would have to be...

Going nowhere to nowhere
off and on in a fraction
at the train's unlisted halts
seeking the way to villages...
where, where, where?

Welcoming unknown faces
hiding tragic tales in their bosoms
striking conversation in known terms
soothing, friendly, conventional, safe
wondering children giggling
waiting to be surprised
festive occasion, an unusual visitor.

And beckoning without beckoning
away from the tangible bickering
looking without looking
a bent, beaten, tired man,
over-worked, tearless, starved daughter
an un-straying, hurrying, naked toddler
passing me by as if no one came
telling without telling
tragic tales in their bosoms
leaving me alone in their village
with people conversing.

Sharing little comforts
drinking in the totality of communion
with promises to forge a future together
wishing good-byes to hearty people
one last look at connections made
in a friendly village,
but seeing without seeing
a broken man, an overworked daughter,
and a toddler hurrying away
and as the train leaves, thinking, hoping,
we connected without connecting.

Projects Approved

- BMIC - Bangalore, Karnataka - environmental and socio-economic impact assessment - Maryland and Pittsburgh - \$2000
- Vanasthali - Pune Dt, Maharashtra - balwaadis and hobby classes for children - Duke - \$2160.
- Jaagriti - Kanpur, U.P. - Lodhar School for child laborers - Maryland - \$5000

Mark your calendar

- AID-San Diego presents "**India Beckons**" - an Indian Classical Music Concert with Guitar artist **Prasanna** on the **23rd of March 2002** at Challenger Middle School Auditorium, Mira Mesa Blvd. For details, please contact:
✉ sandiego@aidindia.org
☎ (858) 695-0626 or visit
🌐 <http://www.aidindia.org/sandiego>
- AID-Dallas presents "**SANGAM 2002**" - 3 Orchestras (**Kismat, Srishti and Aarohi**) performing the entire gamut of Indian Music on the **20th of April 2002**, 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Coppell Middle School (W) Auditorium, Dallas. For more information, please contact:
☎ (972) 867 0912
✉ aiddallas@hotmail.com or visit
🌐 <http://www.aidindia.org/dallas>
- AID-Raleigh welcomes you to "**Bollywood On Tap**", a non-stop extravaganza featuring the greatest oldies and the latest melodies, on the **7th of April 2002**, 6:30p.m. at Hindu Society Extension Hall, Morrisville, NC. For details, please contact:
✉ usmudoi@hotmail.com

Tell your Friends and Family about AID! When you see a good movie, don't you talk to your friends about it? Chances are they will be as eager as you to take part in a good cause!

95% of AID funds come from individuals like you. Please donate generously.

Yes! I would like to make a tax-deductible donation in the amount of

\$50 \$100 \$300 Other _____

I would like ___% to support full time workers through Fellowships Fund.

Name _____ Phone: _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ Email: _____

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