



Dishaa

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The Association for India's Development (AID) Newsletter

Freedom at Midnight, But Where is the Dawn?

Each passing year we see bigger and fancier celebrations of India's Independence Day in various metros in the US and other countries. Rich and ancient cultural traditions of India as well as the vibrant new IT culture are equally displayed with vigor in such programs and most participants beam with the thoughts of "Mera Bharat Mahaan". But, what about that piece of Bharat called Domkhedi that will be submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam? Is that any less "Mahaan"? "We, the people of India..." proclaims the Constitution of India. It does not say, "We the people excluding Dalits, Adivasis, denotified tribes, rural women and child laborers." So why aren't they equal citizens of the nation yet? Why does poverty affect women and the oppressed classes more? Why does so-called development not only by-pass but also inflict greater hardships on tribals and Dalits. Yes, we got our freedom from British rule at midnight- but where is the dawn that brings freedom from poverty and social justice?

AID stands for the Association for India's Development, and we often debate and discuss what we mean by *Development*. While we still can give many different definitions to it, we all agree that it should be something that does not destroy lives and livelihoods. But it is equally important for us to remember what we mean by *India*- that we honestly mean every person who is an Indian citizen, and not just the urban middle classes as is portrayed by the mainstream media. So any Development should strive to address the immediate needs of the most needy Indians, or should at least not destroy what they already have. This, we believe should be a guiding principle for all our efforts.

When every person of Indian origin in the metros of US is willing to identify with the simple forest-dwelling Indians.

When every Indian software expert is willing to give and take, teach and learn, from the Indian organic farmer.

When the children of the urban middle classes, the children of the Narmada Valley and the children weaving carpets in Bihar, all wake up in safe and secure homes,

*Then can we say with conviction **Mera Bharat Mahaan,***

*That will be the **Dawn of a New Era** after the long night of freedom.*

... our tribe was forced to leave in 1980. The forest was acquired for purposes of conservation. The govt. said that our activities were destroying the forest.

That is strange... because I come from the same place too! We were driven out in 1986 when the forest was submerged by a dam.



Hmmm... The logic behind these actions is a little difficult to understand...

I guess that is why complex issues such as development are best left to the experts.



"Poverty is the worst form of violence" -- M.K. Gandhi
"Charity is no substitute for justice withheld" -- Saint Augustine

A "Stitch" in Time Saves Nine in Gujarat

AID volunteers who visited the Gujarat earthquake affected regions identified the National Centre for People's Action in Disaster Preparedness (NCPDP) as one of the NGOs deserving our support. The NCPDP had worked closely with the government in the reconstruction of houses after the Latur quake and has trained the affected people in some of the worst affected and least aided villages in disaster preparedness activities. In a discussion with AIDers in Boston last month, Rajendra Desai, the founder member of the NCPDP elaborated on the various low-cost methods adopted by his group for the rebuilding of houses. These involve the usage of standard building materials (like bricks, cement and mortar) and setting them in a shock-resistant manner, like laying bricks without any gaps and using a foundation that runs deep. Using the lessons learnt from Latur, the NCPDP has planned extensive training for masons for the rebuilding work in Gujarat. Besides, the NCPDP also assists villagers in retrofitting damaged houses and schools. This mainly consists of providing "stitches" in the stone structure and support structures such as iron rods/frames beneath the ceiling of a thatched roof. Such "stitches" go a long way in improving the stability of the houses and even protecting them against future tremors.

The NCPDP welcomes interns who would help them in documentation and also in organizing training for the locals in retrofitting methods. Rajendra Desai hopes that other professionals would join hands with them.

-- Pushpa Achanta (AID-India)

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AID volunteers Rajeev Natarajan and Laura Faist recently visited Gujarat to take stock of the long-term rehabilitation efforts. The entire report and more photos from their visit are at www.careercenter.umd.edu/homepage/rajeev.htm

Ganatar – Helping Rebuild Gujarat

Ganatar's housing project is technologically by Rajendra Desai's NCPDP. Ganatar only supports families of salt-pan workers whose houses have been completely destroyed, but who have not had much external help. The funds are distributed in six phases: Rs.500 each for the first and second half of foundation, Rs.1500 each for every 3ft of construction and Rs.1800 for roofing. Before giving the money, a coordinator inspects the house to see if all the construction guidelines are being followed. The bricks are hand-made by villagers using local material. Though the design and technology is strictly followed, villagers are free to choose how they want to build their house in terms of the number of rooms etc.

DNT... Explosive? Dangerous?

The first time someone mentioned DNT to me, I thought it was a variant of TNT! The person said that DNT was a dangerous entity to go near... When I asked for a clarification, I was told that DNTs were "born criminals". That was an eye-opener to me, who till that day always thought that criminals were made by society, not in a mother's womb. No, I was told, these people, the De-Notified Tribes (DNTs) were born with a craving for thieving and murder.

I later learnt that DNT was how the Government of India referred to the huge section of the Indian populace (about 20 million) that were called "born criminals" under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The origins of this act lie somewhere in the late 1850s when there were a number of uprisings in various parts of India against the British Raj. The CT Act of 1871 basically *classified* the people behind these uprisings as criminals and gave the right to the law enforcers to arrest them at will - these people were, after all, born into the hereditary business of crime!

When the British left India, the Government of India could not call these people criminals. After all, they were legal citizens of India. So all the tribes under the Criminal Tribes Act were de-notified. At the same time, the government also passed a series of Acts titled Habitual Offenders Act, which was almost equivalent to the CT Act, except that it didn't classify whole tribes as born criminals. Glory to the government - they ended the misery of about 20 million people in India.

Sadly though, even today, in every village that is home to DNT settlements, every crime is followed by arrests of people from those settlements; no cause or proof is needed to arrest a "born criminal"! One look at the ratio of such arrests to the arrests that actually led to conviction is enough to show the atrocity that faces these people. Is this civilization? Is this the nation that I am a proud citizen of?

-- Nigamanth Sridhar (AID-Columbus)

AID-Boston and AID-Pittsburgh are supporting Bhasba, in Gujarat, which works for preserving tribal culture and promotion of tribal rights, especially the DNTs.



A make-shift school run by Ganatar in the village of Hammatpura, with just one class, for the children of the salt-pan workers.

Meet our Saathis: Dr. Aruna Ratnam

A volunteer speaks....

Continuing the series on our AID Saathis, we bring to you a profile of AID Saathi Dr. Aruna Ratnam. Ever since her childhood, Aruna has been interested in various social issues. Today she is an acclaimed expert on gender and caste issues, particularly on the importance of cultural factors in social oppression. She has worked with several civil rights activists (through the People's Union for Civil Liberties), Tamil progressive writers, and Dalit movements.

Aruna is currently involved in the teachers-network program of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF), where she helps to start teachers groups across the state to discuss and improve curriculum and teaching methods in their classes. She is also one of the editors of Vizhuthu, a magazine for teachers who want to improve the standard of education in India.

In light of her strong background in education and pedagogy, Aruna's contributions are extremely valuable. One of the main problems rural schools face is that the English books currently used intimidate the children. To remedy this situation, Aruna uses small study cards with pictures, in a friendly learning environment. Children who do badly in school usually face problems at home. The parents are poor, there is no space to study, no guidance or support from family, and so on. Aruna addresses this issue by meeting the parents regularly, arranging a place for the students to study, and by recruiting college students to tutor the kids. Rural children seldom have the facilities that the middle-class/urban children have. Typically, in school, there are no avenues for extra-curricular activities, computer literacy, dance and music, new languages, libraries, personality or career development. Aruna has been working on a systematic approach to providing each child with a specific vocational skill and developing an accessible information database on post-secondary education and employment opportunities. AID-Dallas interacts closely with Aruna to learn from her experiences in children's education, and to provide a support group for her activities.

-- Deepika Chalemela (AID-Dallas)

Why I volunteer for AID?

Volunteers and volunteer organizations have played critical roles in bringing about social change. Understanding volunteerism in an organization like AID has the potential to optimize the use of volunteers' time in leading to social change. To me AID stands for:

Action: I have learnt to work on project reviews, obtaining information on what, how and why we should fund projects, assisting in fund raising efforts, contributing funds, helping plan and coordinate events, and participating in efforts that we believe will make a difference at the village level.

Inspiration: Our efforts work and we touch the lives of thousands of other Indians from so far away! It has motivated me to grow as an individual - especially considering the diversity of people in AID from various professional and academic backgrounds.

Didacticism: AID has been an immense source of knowledge for me to discover India, at the village level. (Can you believe doing that, sitting in the US?)

I joined AID a year ago with the desire to evaluate projects in India in the field of health and nutrition (since I have a public health background). Today I see myself evolved in a way that I am contributing more energy to AID than I had ever thought I would!

-- Smita Ghosh (AID-Boston)

Order a Pedal Power Generator for you or your friend in India!

The latest model of pedal generators developed by Rashron and AID is now on sale and we are at the stage of immediately meeting the demand. The new model has a flywheel -- which means you can simultaneously light up 4 rooms or 4 neighboring houses while pedaling at one go, without the need for a battery; this makes it more energy efficient and environment friendly. The flywheel keeps the lights steady with no fluctuations in intensity. Pedaling is very light with no strain due to the flywheels. If you do buy the battery then you can pedal during the day, store the pedal power, and use it for lighting at night. We have already shipped the new pedal generators from Baroda and orders are pouring in from groups in MP, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chattisgarh, TN and AP. An energy company from South Africa is interested in replicating the generator to augment the solar panels they currently sell and we are helping them. They are mainly interested in the rural livelihoods angle and supplementary battery charging capability. AID-Australia and other friends there have also taken enormous interest in the concept and are helping us with this project.

AID is subsidizing these pedal power generators for use in rural areas that do not yet have electricity. People from cities are also buying this generator without the subsidy, for using it as **Exercycle** and for having their own charka of electricity. To order your own unit of the pedal generator, please contact us by email at aid@vsnl.com. You can also bring this to the notice of NGOs and schools in rural India and help them get in touch with us. We thank everyone who continues to be interested in this project and has helped us at various stages both directly and by contacting their friends who gave suggestions or helpful criticism.

-- Ravi and Aravinda (AID-Mumbai)

"Only after the last tree has been cut down. Only after the last river has been poisoned. Only after the last fish has been caught. Only then you will find that money cannot be eaten. "

--Cree Indian Chief

Visit a Village – Surodi, Maharashtra

On the 12th of May, Ravi, Aravinda (AID Fellows) and I went on a trip to Surodi village near Pune. This visit was aimed at understanding how the villagers of Surodi were planning to develop their village. We reached Surodi by road, and were warmly welcomed by Ashok and other villagers, including a lot of children. Ashok was a very enthusiastic and a motivated person. I learned later that he is one of the main instructors of the Vigyan Vahini (Science of Wheels) program.

Ashok and some other villagers took us around the village and showed us the areas where they intend to construct small dams or repair old ones to capture rainwater. After lunch we went for a village meeting held under a big old tree. The Sarpanch was a lady and the meeting also had a good representation from the women folk of the village. The women felt that one of the best things that happened to the village is the absolute stop on alcohol consumption by the village men. As a consequence, the men are able to save more money and have stopped abusing the women. They also have a few savings groups among the men and the intention is to start a few more among the men and women. They are also trying to increase literacy in the village. Currently, there is only one primary school. Most of the village children attend this school and they go to a nearby village for secondary education.

The people of Surodi are very inspired by the model village, Ralegaon Siddhi and are striving to make their village another Ralegaon Siddhi. Some of them have already visited Ralegaon Siddhi to get further ideas for planning their projects. Finally the meeting ended with songs by the village boys; the girls were too shy to get up and sing.

--Shoba Subramaniam (AID-Pittsburgh)

Some Recently Approved Projects

- Continued support for running 6 platform schools in Bhubaneswar, Orissa. Includes special adult education programs related to HIV/AIDS, books for preprimary children in local languages, and facilitating the admission of 17 children to formal schools at their respective grades (College Park).
- Republishing the book "Taking Sides" by community health activist Satyamala, to be used for educating the health activists in various districts participating in the People's health Assembly (Columbus).
- Support for immediate flood relief efforts in Orissa, in collaboration with the NGO Adhikar (College Park).
- Seed money to expand the network of savings groups started about 2 years ago in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu. (Blacksburg/College Park).
- Support the publication of a quarterly magazine (called Vizhuthu) for teachers to share practical ideas and teaching tips (Boston).

Mark your Calendar!

- ❖ Friends of River Narmada in Pittsburgh present a documentary by Ali Kazimi titled "Narmada: A Valley Rises" on the 12th of September, at the Carnegie Mellon University Campus, Pittsburgh. On the 15th of September, we will have a workshop, "Art for Social Justice" by Aparna Sindhoor, followed by "River Rites". River Rites explores the real life consequences of big dam projects, such as in the Narmada Valley in India, through a unique new style of performance that blends Indian classical dance, folk dance, yoga, world music and narration. River Rites is choreographed by Aparna Sindhoor, and features text by award-winning playwright Raju Sivasankaran. Exact locations and times will be posted at www.andrew.cmu.edu/~aid.
- ❖ AID College Park presents India Beckons - a cultural event planned for the 22nd of September 2001 in which major development related issues will be addressed through dance, music, and skits. Our aim is to increase our volunteer base and let people know more about AID, its activities and how to get involved! The program at University of Maryland will run from 12 pm to midnight and will include Antakshari, Quiz, Dumbcharades, Dances, Music, Skits and Dandiya. For further info, contact Suchi at suchi_r_c@yahoo.com

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