

AID CONFERENCE, PITTSBURGH: May 24-26, 2003

The 5th Annual AID conference, hosted by AID Pittsburgh this year, brought together more than 200 people from across the US and India. The conference opened with an address by AID Jeevansaathi (full-timer) Ravi Kunchimanchi, one of the founders of AID, who has worked full-time on AID causes since 1998. He discussed AID India's activities including updates on the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) and the Hundred Block Plan. Volunteers then took a pledge committing to Nirman (Development), Sangharsh (Struggle) and Seva (service), in memory of Shobha, a 25-year old activist from the Narmada Valley, who recently died by getting trapped in the silt accumulating because of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

Keynote Address – Swati Desai, an activist for environmental and social causes and an AID Saathi (fellow) delivered the keynote address. She focused on the grassroots development work in the Juna Mozda region in Gujarat, the environmental protection work in the Gujarat Golden Corridor, Gujarat earthquake rebuilding and communal harmony efforts. Swati founded the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti, which is involved in educating and mobilizing people affected by industrial pollution and bad government policies.

Gujarat Process – Guest speaker Nishrin Jafri gave an emotional account of her family's experience during the communal riots and reminded the audience of the legacy of her father, Ehsan Jafri, a former Member of Parliament, poet and an social activist. Mr. Jafri was among the more than a thousand people brutally murdered during the riots. We need, said Ms. Jafri, to reclaim social harmony and justice from the evil of communalism. This session also included reflections through pictures taken in the field by AID volunteer Gautam Desai during his earthquake and riot relief efforts in Gujarat's affected areas. His talk connected the audience to the affected people and the issues emerging from the intersection of disaster relief, development, communalism and voluntarism.

Bhopal Campaign – Champa Devi, Rashida Bi (survivors of the gas disaster in Bhopal) and Satinath Sarangi (an activist who has dedicated his life to the Bhopal cause) presented personal accounts of the disaster caused in 1984 by Union Carbide's (now a subsidiary of Dow Chemicals) negligence of safety policies in the Union Carbide Plant at Bhopal. The session looked at the continuing aftermath of the tragedy. The survivors spoke of the complete indifference of Dow Chemicals and the Indian Government towards the victims of the disaster. AID has worked to help bring legal and social pressure on Dow and the Indian Government in the past few years. There remains a need, the attendees agreed, for more of such activism as well as efforts to provide sustainable employment and health care to the people of the region who have suffered now for two decades. The conference attendees unanimously passed a resolution after this session expressing solidarity with the



AID volunteers share a song with the survivors of the Bhopal gas tragedy at the Annual AID Conference in Pittsburgh.

affected people of Bhopal and their struggle for justice.

Natural Resources – Guest speaker Nafisaben Barot of Utthan talked about the grassroots water management initiatives in the drylands of Kutch as well as water policy issues and campaigns. This session examined what water means to different sections of society, and focused on two large initiatives being promoted in India – namely the privatization of water and the inter-linking of rivers.

Other Sessions – Other sessions included a discussion on the responsibilities of AID volunteers, analysis of key projects such as the Hundred Block Plan, and exploring issues such as Holistic Living, Gender Issues, and Pluralism. Additionally, there were interactive workshops on chapter administration, fund raising, activism, treasury and project management. The conference also featured displays and posters on various issues such as dowry, communalism, and skills development by different chapters.

The second evening of the conference showcased the talents of the volunteers who presented skits, songs and dances. Apart from being entertaining, this session underscored the effectiveness of the cultural media to communicate social and political issues of the society.

– *From the Conference Press Release*

Congratulations!

Anandi group in Gujarat was recognized as an “Asian Hero” in Time. AID is proud of its association with them and congratulates them for this recognition.

AID-Kansas City received an award for the Best New Student Organization from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

AID-Johns Hopkins received the OMSA (Old Mutual South Africa) Vanguard Award for their efforts in creating a community-wide program for peace.

Bhopal Still Lives

Last month, various AID chapters hosted two extraordinary women survivors from Bhopal – Rashida Bi and Champa Devi. As leaders of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB) they have been invited by organizations like AID on a US tour to talk about the continuing tragedy in Bhopal and to show solidarity with other Dow Chemicals-affected communities in the US. Their mission is to seek justice for Bhopal and to ensure that there are no more Bhopals.

More than 8,000 people died due to the toxic gas leak at the Union Carbide plant on Dec 3, 1984 in Bhopal. About 150,000 still people suffer from various gas-exposure related disorders. And survivors look for justice even now, 18 years after the tragedy.

Their daily struggles against immense odds highlights the worst in the current society. Over 90% of the gas-affected community is illiterate and the economic opportunities in the area are non-existent. The children of the survivors suffer deformities and chromosomal aberrations.

The survivors have four basic demands. Dow officials should face trial on criminal charges. The company should provide long-term medical care and complete economic rehabilitation. It should treat the contamination in and around the abandoned site. Finally, the Indian government should quickly disburse the more than half of the unused \$470 million from the initial settlement.

The survivors' US tour ended on June 5th with a call for a relay fast until the 19th anniversary of the tragedy on December 3rd. They have also called on the supporters to declare this date as global day of action against corporate crime.

Many AID chapters are actively supporting ICJB in this struggle by engaging the Indian government and Dow, and exploring health and income generation initiatives. Recently, Rachna Dhingra of AID-Ann Arbor went to Bhopal to coordinate the campaign from there for a year. She will also help AID network with the local community and other organizations working in the area.

- Nishant Jain (AID-Austin)

Taste of India at Cincinnati

More than 1500 people had a "Taste of India" on May 4th and helped AID-Cincinnati realize its objective - create awareness about AID and raise some funds.

Booths or stalls from different Indian restaurants were the primary attraction. The restaurants dished out an array of Indian delicacies. Other attractions included – an ethnic fashion show by children, Bharatanatyam dance recitals, AID-Ecoshop stall and an evergreen Mehendi (Henna) booth.

- Karthik Suryanarayanan (AID-Cincinnati)

Association with Aranyika Continues

College Park and Raleigh chapters have been working with Aranyika for the last three years. Aranyika has been instrumental in completing a large portion of unfinished work with the Tabelugummi check dam project in Andhra Pradesh. They mobilized villagers to volunteer for several weeks in arresting leakage of the main canal. They also laid concrete bed in the main canal and installed water regulation systems. Due to their efforts over the last two years, around 400 acres are being irrigated with this water. Consequently the villagers are able to cultivate a second crop in 150 acres and take up vegetable cultivation in 20 acres in Ganneruput and Borrathadi villages.

AID-College park has extended support to Aranyika to complete the remaining work including blasting of rocks that block the left canal and to organize functioning Water Users Associations. AID will also work with Aranyika in organizing their savings program.

Srinivas Kroviddy (AID-College Park)

Sanjoy Hazarika in Bay Area

AID-Bay Area with Jonaki (Bay Area Assamese community) recently hosted a screening of the film "A River's Story: The Quest for the Brahmaputra". The screening was followed by a discussion with Dr. Sanjoy Hazarika, well-known author, journalist and one of the film's writers.

The film traces the path of the mighty Brahmaputra river as it meanders through Tibet, India and Bangladesh changing both its name and its nature. The film explores how the river influences the life, customs and culture of the people living on its banks. After the screening, the vibrant Assamese community had many questions for Dr. Sanjoy not just on the film but also on current affairs in the North East as well.

- Karuna Muthiah (AID-Bay Area)



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