



ASHA KIRAN

Asha-Seattle's Newsletter

ANNUAL REPORT 2015



Greetings all!

Welcome to the annual report for the year 2015, showcasing one of our projects 'Sumavanam'. Sumavanam means "good and beautiful garden" and the article has been authored by its founder Mr. Narasimhan. His report below is an inspiring story about creating new pathways and support for the children and their community. It also highlights the social and education challenges faced by the underprivileged children and their communities, and the impact that ASHA is able to make.

Please find our chapter update and finance update from the chapter coordinator and treasurer. We hope to have your continued involvement in upcoming and future events

enabling us to support well deserved projects bringing significant change within the underprivileged communities in India.

Thank you as always, for your support and assistance at Asha for Education, Seattle Chapter. We hope you will join us with boundless energy and enthusiasm as we enter the summer, and the rest of this year. We look forward to hearing your suggestions and comments. Our contact e-mail id is seattle@ashanet.org

Asha Seattle Team

Chapter Update from Chapter Coordinator

As we celebrate the 25th year of Asha for Education, we feel proud looking at the number of children and their families touched by our services and its long term positive impact. I would like to use this milestone to thank all our donors, project partners (NGOs in India), volunteers and the Northwest community for being part of our journey of catalyzing socio-economic change in India through the education of underprivileged children, and making us the biggest Asha for Education chapter worldwide.

In the last year, we have chosen only a few new projects to support, and one of them was almost on the brink of closure - **Digantar** in Rajasthan. **Digantar** focuses on education of primary to high school children through progressive and independent learning based on David Horsburgh philosophy¹. Children from the school grow up to be independent and confident learners. Digantar had already shut down their Middle school due to lack of funds and teachers were taking a salary cut when this project approached us for a funding. Thanks to all the volunteers whose active engagement allowed us to send funds to the project in time to prevent interruption to the education of the children.

We were honored to host Mr. Adhik Kadam from **Borderless World Foundation (BWF)** at Jammu and Kashmir for a talk open to the public. It was such an inspiring and motivating story on how during his college days he came to Kashmir for an internship and couldn't look past the fact that communal tension in Jammu and Kashmir area had created lakhs of orphaned children. Adhik took it upon himself to start a home for orphaned girl children and the

program has grown pretty big in last decade. Our volunteers are working on funding this project from Seattle chapter.

We were able to expand our domain into disaster relief in partnership with Association for India's Development for bringing relief to Chennai flood victims. We are receiving an overwhelming response for many of our programs like Junior Asha, Team Asha Biking and Team Asha Climbing programs which is helping with both our outreach in northwest communities and also with increasing our fund raising.

Along with these big wins, there have been a few challenges which we are currently working on. We were able to get most of the coordination teams in healthy state but there is still a long way to go to make all of them thriving. Our outreach during Giving Campaign last year wasn't up to our expectations, mainly due to lower volunteer participation. This has significantly brought our fundraising down for the year. Looking forward, one of our topmost priority will be raising more funds this year so that we won't have to cut on our projects. We are also going to focus on increasing volunteer engagement with special emphasis on volunteers in coordinator roles.

Once again, thanks for all your support. If you would like to learn more about Asha or want to visit any of our project partners in India to see direct impact of our work then reach out to us at seattle@ashanet.org. If you or anyone you know would like to explore volunteering with Asha, please reach out to us directly.

¹ The philosophy encourages to have no hierarchical divisions or distinctions, and no artificial division of classes like I, II, no hierarchical distinction between teachers and students. It promotes systems for the teachers to consider themselves mere facilitators of children's learning process

Sumavanam

Introduction

There have been various kinds of schools which have tried to educate children. Though they might have followed different approaches, their main goal has always been to create a healthy learning environment. One such school, Neel Bagh, was started at Rayalpad, once a small village in Karnataka. It was started by David Horsburgh, a renowned educationist, who was also the author of several children's textbooks in a variety of subjects including English, Science, Environmental Science and Craft (published by the Oxford University Press).

The philosophy behind the activities at Neel Bagh has been extensively documented. There were no punishments, rewards, nor comparisons. Children were free to learn at their own pace and were continuously evaluated without either exams or grades. While most such schools were for the privileged, Neel Bagh was exclusively for the underprivileged village children. The children, apart from academics learnt music, dance, poetry reading, drama, painting, clay work and sewing. These were serious activities. In short we feel Neel Bagh had all the elements of "Real Education".³

Narasimhan and Usha are the founding couple of the Sumavanam School which followed the Neel Bagh system of education. Narasimhan did his Masters in Technology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur and then worked at the National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL) at Bangalore. After attending a seminar by Mr Horsburgh in Bangalore, he decided to get involved in educating rural underprivileged children. Narasimhan joined the Rishi Valley School and started the rural centre. Usha meanwhile was teaching at the Neel Bagh School, helping Mr. Horsburgh to put his ideas into practice. After getting married, Usha and Narasimhan, with the help of David Horsburgh, set up the Sumavanam School.⁴

Sources of Funding

Initially, the school was supported by royalties of books by David Horsburgh. Subsequently, as Narasimhan and Usha were involved in training Rishi Valley Rural School teachers, Dr. Radhika Hunsberger, the director of Rishi Valley helped Sumavanam get funding from the Department of Human Resource Development (Govt. of India). At that time, Usha and Narasimhan were involved in projects with Action Aid (India), and during that period Action Aid also provided funds to the school.

When this funding stopped, Dr. T.M. Srinivasan, at Arizona (a professor at that time), introduced them to the Asha chapter of Arizona. Subsequently, Ashok and Jayashree at Seattle introduced them to the Asha chapter of Seattle.⁵

Funding was also received from the Neel Bagh Trust, UK, before its managing trustee retired. This is no longer a source of funding. In

addition, the United Nations International School (UNIS) provides donations through money collected at school-children's parties.

Description of the Sumavanam School

Sumavanam is situated in a rural part of Andhra Pradesh, about 120 kilometres (75 miles) from Bangalore. The school has 43 children aged between 5 and 10. Most of the children are from families whose parents' income is less than \$50 a month.

The school consists of three rooms. The walls are made of mud and the roofs are tiled. There is a playground on campus. Children and teachers sit on the floor and use small desks.

By choice, the school does not employ any cleaning or maintenance staff. Children come in at 8 a.m. and are divided into groups and each group is assigned a classroom or area of the school that they clean.



Classes start with a singing class in which they sing children's songs in various languages, including English. This is followed by Mathematics, English and Sciences. The children of different grades sit in the same classroom, a model called vertical grouping. Each does work based on their level, which emphasis on the child to work at her own pace. There are no comparisons and no punishments, ensuring that a slow learner has a better chance to perform. This places a greater responsibility on the teacher as, he or she has to constantly assess the children and plan class work and worksheets accordingly.

² AID is a volunteer organization that works with grassroots groups in India to promote sustainable, equitable and just development

³ Ref: Real Education: Varieties of Freedom, chap. on Neel Bagh and Sumavanam. by David Gribble

⁴ More information available in: site visit-Asha, Ashok-2003; vernacular educators Usha, Narasimhan Taleemnet, Goa-2005

⁵ Ref: site visit Asha-Ashok and Jayashree-2003 <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=192>

The children are given biscuits during break. The school does not provide food for the children. As it is a free school (students do not pay fees and all the books and writing materials are given to them free of cost), we feel that the parents should at least provide them with food. More importantly, we believe that the children should not feel that the school is providing them everything. With more funding, we would like to supplement their nutritional needs (possibly by providing them with eggs thrice a week).

In language teaching, the emphasis is on encouraging children to write on their own, while, in Mathematics and Sciences the emphasis is on doing things that help reinforce concepts. The idea is to encourage children to think more deeply and laterally about concepts. They also do a lot of craft work which helps them improve their concentration and imagination.

In addition to academics, great emphasis is laid on preventing children from using abusive language, complaining about others, plagiarizing and from lying. We believe that this can only be achieved in an environment where children are not compared to one another and are free of fear. Children are encouraged to help each other both within and outside the classroom. An older child would help a younger child read, use the bathroom or in cleaning the classroom. This is done, not as a class leader but as a sister or brother.

All children are given equal importance, and there are no class leaders. The children keep the campus free of plastic and paper. Snakes are not killed. The older children used to catch them and leave them in nearby bushes. They take care of plants and water some of them regularly.



Impact

Most of the children are from families whose fathers are alcoholics. Despite this, none of those who were students from Sumavanam consume alcohol. They counsel other educated youth in the villages regarding courses they should take and the jobs they should apply to. They help the villagers when they are very sick by taking them to proper hospitals in the city (sometimes as far

as Bangalore). They help their family members in educating their children (nephews and also nieces because they have been taught the importance of education for all children irrespective of gender).

Some of the ex-students, who grew up in small huts while their families earned less than \$50 a month, are now working at large organizations including IBM, WIPRO and Cap Gemini. Sumavanam also has ex-students working in senior positions at a construction company and some who are working in accounts with auditors. In each of these cases, the principles of honesty and hard work that were emphasized at school from when they were very young has been invaluable to their career growth.

Those girls from the school, who were forced by their parents to get married before completing their education, are educating their girl children and some are group leaders in village committees. One of the students was head of the local panchayat and is well respected for the work she did during her term. Despite their meagre income, some women offered to work for free to help repair the school building.

The school enjoys a strong connection with and immense good faith from the local communities, and we are keen to continue providing the quality education that they have for over thirty five years.

Challenges

Nearly all households in the surrounding villages now have television; most youth have mobile phones and two wheelers. This access to technology, it was believed, would enable those in villages to be able to make better choices of crops to invest in. Increased connectivity would lead to better access to markets thus enabling those in villages to make better decisions.

Unfortunately, none of this has come to fruition. Instead, access to television has simply increased access to a larger variety of entertainment, often in houses that have no more than a single room. Children, have been hardest hit by this, as they are now forced to study in small houses with a television in the background. Similarly, improved access to mobile phones has proved to be a distraction to children, as opposed to a learning aid.

These gadgets, despite their educational potential, are hindering learning because children do not get enough sleep, enough time to read, play outside or interact with others. Instead, due to small living spaces, they watch television with their parents, which largely consists of extremely violent movies and serials that are full of obscene language and content not suitable for children (including the abuse of women).

The financial pressures that these gadgets place on families is forcing some to adopt unethical practices including dealing in illegal alcohol and the stresses are leading to extreme gambling and alcoholism.

The general atmosphere in the villages is fast deteriorating with consumerism replacing interest in education and health. Local crafts, dances and drama are being replaced by popularist songs from movies which are nearly always obscene and degrading of women.

In the present scenario it is absolutely essential that places are created for children where they are exposed to good music, clean environment, honesty and hard work. Also a sense of wonder at the things they have not heard about or even about things around them. These can only be achieved through small schools like ours.

However, these can only be achieved by having a group of dedicated teachers with knowledge and the willingness to learn. The core aspect of teaching is to understand how a child is forming concepts and learning to solve problems. If she is doing something wrong the role of the teacher is to make her understand the error, and then help her relearn the right way.

One of the biggest challenges in continuing to run the school is political. The local government school is not well managed and has poor teaching standards. As a result, parents would prefer to send their children to Sumavanam. The government school thus sees Sumavanam as a rival that they are losing students to, and with the help of local officials, are trying to shut us down.



Looking Forward

The biggest challenge is in getting good teachers and maintaining the school. One recent appointment, with a degree in mathematics, science and education, was later discovered to be incapable of basic spelling and unable to understand basic concepts. Unfortunately, this is the quality of teachers we can expect at the current salaries we are capable of offering. We would like to increase this amount from just under \$150 to between \$200 and \$220 a month. We believe that this increase will enable those truly interested in education to work with us, while also being able to address their everyday needs. (Usha and Narasimhan are each paid Rs.8000 a month-after 32 years).

We would also like to replace the roofs of the three school buildings, which are 33 years old and have been eaten up by white ants. Most writing desks also need replacement.

The school currently has government recognition until 2017 at which point we will have to reapply for recognition which is provided for periods of five years. Getting recognition will require certain maintenance work to the school buildings including the replacement of their roofs.

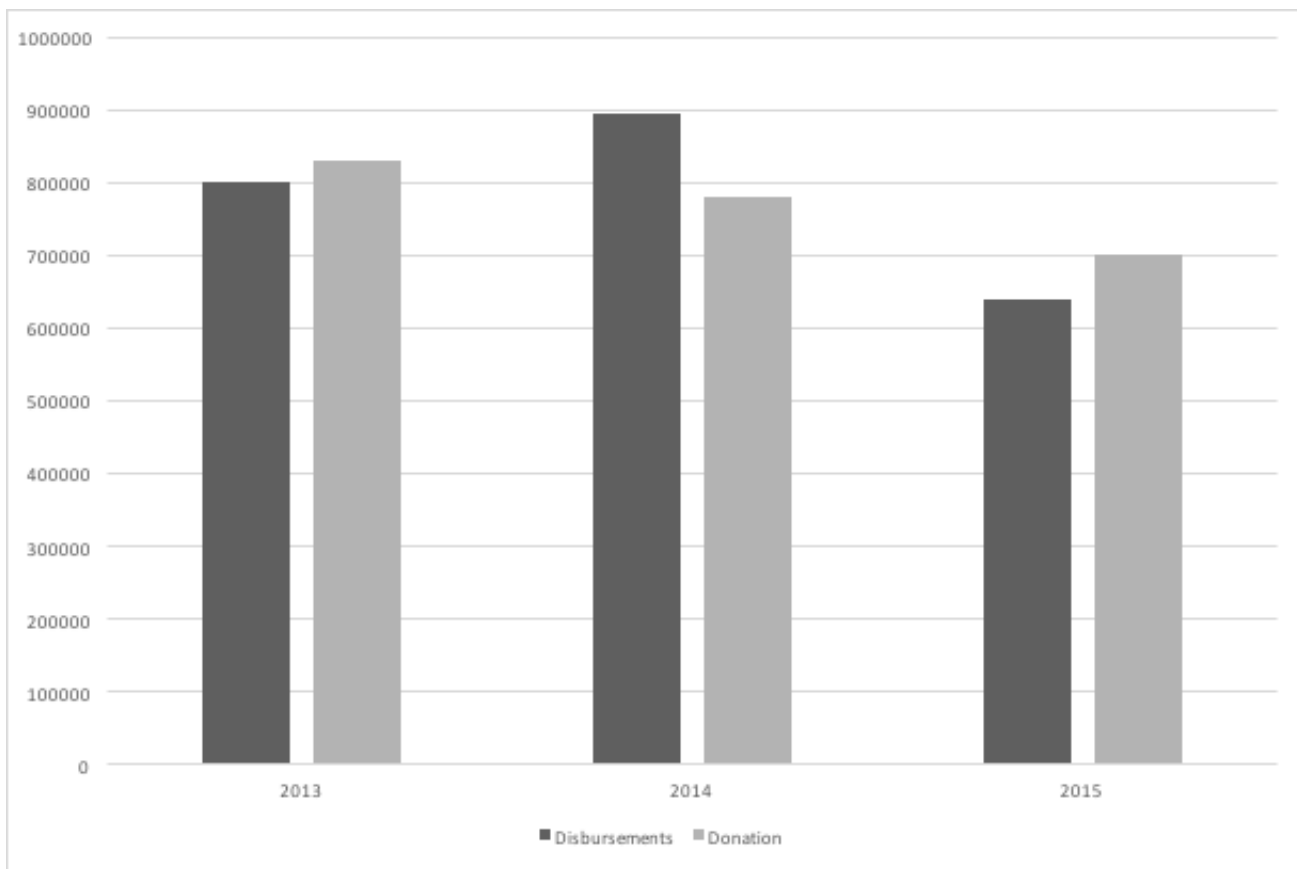
We are willing to face all the challenges described above, despite the ugly political dimension that some might take. However, it would be a pity if we were to go through the trouble of finding teaching staff, repairing buildings and fighting local corruption only to shut down a year later for lack of funds.

We are grateful for the support that Asha has provided to the Neel Bagh Trust over the past several years. The funding provided so far will last until the end of April, 2017. We hope that Asha will continue to support us and help us in addressing, in any way possible, our problem of ensuring the financial stability of the Sumavanam school for a sufficiently long period (at least for 5 years).



Financial Summary

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|---------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Disbursements | 800,000 | 895,000 | 640,000 |
| Donation | 830,000 | 781,000 | 700,000 |



In 2015, with the support of all the donors we were able to raise \$702,000. However the donation has declined compared to last year for both projects and events. We did increase the funding from last year to our existing projects to compensate more than the inflation. Obviously we couldn't increase as much as last year due to shortfall in donations. For 2015, we have set aside some funds to support new projects and also carved out some funds as one time funding to help our existing projects with specific needs such as infrastructure components etc. We have disbursed \$640,000 amounts to new and existing projects and hoping to have continued support of our donors in 2016.