Dishaa

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT

When people lead...

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A Day with RTI on Wheels

Tribal people of Banaskantha learn to access information
Photo: Harinesh Pandya

"*Gadi side me laga do.*" The person at the toll gate pulls us over. But instead of the routine arguments over our vehicle size, he asks, "*Problem hai, help karoge?*" We explain how he can use the Right to Information (RTI) Act to help address his problem. The day begins well, and we are off to the villages in the Aravalli mountains.

In countries like Sweden people have had access to government records since the 18th century. India got the RTI act only in 2005. We dreamed of giving the power of RTI to the powerless in their fight against the giants. Historically, the invention of the wheel gave us speed and reach. Fittingly, "RTI on Wheels," a mobile legal ambulance was born in 2008 with support from AID. We've been on the road ever since.

11 AM: As we stop for tea, the curious tea staller enquires about our mission. Prabhat bhai explains to the gathered crowd that citizens have the right to know. Within minutes our impromptu "legal clinic" is ready, complete with a table, reference material, laptop and TV screen. We brief them about filing RTI applications to get information, and leave pamphlets at the tea stall.

We are now in Veerpur, a beautiful village near the Aravalli foothills. Forty people gather and voice their problems. No pakka road, no bus service, no health center, vacant teacher posts… the list is long. Land titles allotment to 24 families is pending for years.

We help in drafting RTI applications for these 24 families, seeking information on reason for the delay. The entire village enthusiastically participates.

Several people, including the Sarpanch, volunteer to file RTI for six elderly people who have not received pension. We stay back because of popular demand. We screen a film on Hivre Bazar, a model village that won the President's award. A long question - answer session follows. The quality of the questions amazes us.

11 PM: A typically busy day has ended. We place a solar lantern outside to keep wild animals away. As I tiredly settle to sleep, admiring the thousands of stars, I am filled with happiness and satisfaction.

Pankti Jog coordinates Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahel and has travelled over 200,000 miles in 8 states with the RTI on Wheels bus since 2008. AID has supported RTI on Wheels since 2008. Athreya Shankar, who studies physics at University of Colorado and volunteers for AID in Boulder, helped with this article.

The Jewel of India:

Tara Ahluwalia Fights Patriarchy in Rajasthan

At the Indian Society of International Law, Tara Ahluwalia was recognized as a "Jewel of India" for her pathbreaking work in the field of women's empowerment from the grassroots to the policy level.

She stands with the most vulnerable in their struggle against sexual assault and against the patriarchal culture that promotes it.

When Suman, a six-year old child, was raped by an 80-year old religious leader in Bhilwara, Rajasthan, the local community fined the family Rs. 16,000 and prevented them from going to the police station. Thousands of people in Bhilwara continued to worship the religious leader, locally called a "Bhopa."

Suman's family took her and left their home at 2 am and travelled 90 km to meet Taraji around 6 am. The girl was promptly given medical care. Next, from Taraji's experience, she had learnt and devised clever techniques to file police cases with evidence. Since children are often afraid to talk in front of policemen, Taraji had the girl narrate the incident in her home, recorded the video and made a CD for documentary evidence. She also collected the child's undergarments and vessels from the farm as evidence.

Taraji started the court trial on Bhopa and eleven Jati panchayat (caste council) members. Taraji had Suman

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facebook.com/aidindia

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Taraji receiving Jewel of India Award

under her custody. Even when the court case was going on, two of Bhopa's followers tried to kidnap the girl when she was in the restroom. With the help of the police, Taraji saved the girl from kidnapping. She filed a complaint about this in the court and demanded Rs. 3 lakhs compensation. The accused Bhopa and the 11 Jati panchayat members are currently behind bars. The case is also filed under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POSCO) Act. Taraji got media attention to this issue and advocated to get rid of Bhopas as they use their powerful role to make sexual assaults. Suman has stayed very strong through this process and continues to go to school.

Aparna Lakshmanan researches blood cancer at the Ohio State University and volunteers for AID in Columbus.

Visit aidindia.org to to read more about Taraji's work, which AID has supported since 2009.

AID LifeStyle

Asked about the agricultural crisis, "what can city people do?" farmer, poet & activist Wendell Berry replied "eating is an agricultural act."

Millet is an earth-friendly, farmer friendly, nutritious grain that our great grandparents ate much more often than we do. Try this simple Pongal recipe by N. Anasuya.

Kodo Millet Pongal

Ingredients

1/2 cup Green Gram (Moong dal),
1 cup Kodo millet*, Salt (to taste), Ghee (1 tsp)
Pepper powder (1.5 tsp), Cashews (optional)

For tempering

Cumin seeds (1 tsp), Asafoetida (a pinch)
Curry leaves (if available), Oil (2 tsp)

Instructions

Take the Green gram and Kodo millet together in a bowl and wash thoroughly.

Add 4 cups of water, pepper powder and salt.

Cook for 3-4 whistles in a pressure cooker.

In a separate pan, temper the cumin seeds and the asafoetida in oil. Once the cumin seeds turn golden brown, turn off and add the curry leaves.

Add the tempering to the bowl of cooked gram and millets.

Fry the cashews in ghee and add to the Pongal.

* Ask for millet at your local grocer or natural food store.

From the Editors' Desk

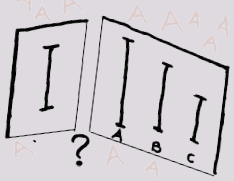
Cloaks of Denial

A casual remark sometimes makes a more lasting impact than a well thought-out discourse.

Kiran Vissa is at my dining table after his lunchtime talk organized by AID Seattle. I have volunteered to interview Kiran for Dishaa. Kiran has a matter-of-fact way of speaking; he brings the stories to you untainted by his own emotion, making them stand out even more starkly in your mind. Like the story of a farmer, sunk in a debt growing at exorbitant interest rates, facing droughts and failing crops, being offered a way out of his debt - to send his daughter to the money lender for a week. Kiran told the story at a recent talk and moved on, but a shocked silence filled the room.

Before we start the interview, I ask Kiran if I can offer him something - cantaloupe, perhaps, or grapes? Grapes, they seem to be Kiran's favorite. He asks casually if the grapes are organic, fully expecting them to be. They are not. I have bought my son's favorite variety of red grapes, ignoring the fact that they are not organic. Kiran declines the grapes. "Snob," I tease him. "No, you don't want to put poison in your body, no?" Kiran asks in his matter-of-fact tone. Indeed, I don't want to put poison in my body, or my son's body. Turns out grapes are especially bad due to the heavy chemicals used on them which are absorbed easily.

It is easy to follow the crowd, wearing our cloaks of denial. The classic social conformity experiments by Solomon Asch in the 1950s demonstrate this phenomenon. What would you do if asked which line out of three choices matches a reference line, and most of the people around you are choosing the line that is, to you, obviously too long? It turns out a third of us will choose the same wrong answer. Imagine now this pressure amplified by relentless advertising to promote non-sustainable ways of living. It is easy to ignore that something is not organic, or was produced in a sweatshop with inhumane and unsafe conditions.



As a physicist, I love the opportunities science and technology provide us. However, I wonder - should we be creating so much waste to be left in the landfills? Should we be choosing such input-heavy ways of farming, leaving lands infertile and driving farmers to end their lives? Should we be consuming so much?

I hardly know what an ideal world would look like, or how we would get there - the only thing I do know is it will only be organic grapes for my son from now on.

Do you have stories to share? We would love to hear your thoughts – from the practical to the visionary. Send your contributions and letters to dishaa@aidindia.org

Cultivating Solutions: Interview with Kiran Vissa

Kiran Vissa was an electrical engineer in Maryland before returning to India to work on farmers' issues as an AID Jeevansaathi.

In the past 15 years, over 300,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide, devastating families and communities across India, particularly in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The agrarian crisis and its myriad impacts on food production, the environment and rural communities have been the focus of Kiran Vissa's work. In 2010, Kiran co-founded Rythu Swarajya Vedika, comprising farmers' organizations in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

Dishaa: Why are so many farmers committing suicide ?

Kiran: Farmers' suicides indicate the deep crisis in agriculture. Farmers are caught in a trap of high-input agriculture – the cost of seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides has increased along with the cost of labor. Meanwhile, produce prices have remained stagnant, squeezing their margins. Secondly, government support systems are failing miserably: farmers need timely bank loans, crop insurance and compensation in case of disaster. Unsustainable models of agriculture are depleting soil fertility, groundwater levels and farmer health.

Dishaa: What are some of the core issues Rythu Swarajya Vedika is working on?

Kiran: We are campaigning to make the government accept how deep the crisis is, that thousands of farmers commit suicide every year, not the 100-150 that they officially recognize.

Second, we promote sustainable agriculture. Organizations in our network help farmers move away from high-cost, high-input agriculture that spoils soil fertility, depletes groundwater, and deepens the whole crisis. We encourage farmers to rely on local, organic inputs; save their own seeds; grow a diversity of crops instead of a single crop; and grow food for basic food security. We also advocate with the government to adopt sustainable agriculture practices at a large scale.

Third, we focus on disadvantaged sections within the farming community - tenant farmers, small or landless farmers and women farmers. Excluded from government support systems such as bank loans, these farmers depend on money lenders. They don't get crop insurance or compensation when there is a disaster.

Although women do 70% of agricultural work, they do not own the land. We are working with these farmers to access government support and assert their rights.

Dishaa: What are some of your successes?

Kiran: Through our work with farmers, organizations, governments and the media, we have been able to bring about the following:

Thousands of farmers have switched to sustainable agriculture methods and formed cooperatives to market their produce. Our work inspired a scale-up program by the government reaching a million farmers.

Dry land farmers are growing millets, which we help to process and market for higher return.

The government has recognized many of the farmers' suicide cases, enabling affected families to get ex-gratia compensation to settle their outstanding loans.

The number of tenant farmers who got Loan Eligibility Cards in Telangana went from zero to 25,000 this year. We expect to reach 200,000 next year.

Andhra Pradesh government introduced a separate agriculture budget to improve financial allocations towards schemes for farmers. We made a model agriculture budget that we are pushing the government to adopt.

Our approach is not to wage a lone battle, but to build our agenda into the agenda of the majority of the governments and the media, and succeed on these issues.

Sonali Tamhankar and Pavan Vaidyanathan volunteer for AID in Seattle and the Bay Area respectively.

Farmer's crisis, Our crisis

I look at the food on my plate
and think of those who grew it
With the few rupees I spent
I trust I paid those
who worked the fields
and those whose land it was.

What I pay is meagre
and it does not reach
whose produce reaches me
For their children remain hungry,
those who empower me.

When I buy a good cotton t-shirt
I pay hundreds, even thousands more
some for the great slogan
a lot for the logo
and the shiny shop window
but for the cotton that the farmers grew
what they must have got, does it need
even ten fingers to count?

They are deep in debt
those who grow the clothes
that define me.

Isn't it strange that it is easier
for their products to reach me
than for my money to reach them
and yet we need to find a way
so that it isn't they who pay.

Ravi Kuchimanchi

AID 2016 Calendars are here!

An inspiring story from the field and a beautiful lake or river every month. Get your calendar from: calendar.aidindia.org or write to calendar@aidindia.org

Recently Approved Projects

Rural Development and Service Society: Decentralized Democracy, Vizag District, Andhra Pradesh ($6923, DC-Metro): Gram sabha (village council) committee members learn to use Panchayat Raj Extension, Forest Rights, Employment Guarantee, and Right to Education Acts.

Critical Action Center in Movement: Environmental Justice, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand ($7021, Bay Area): Communities displaced by dams and landslides advocate for just rehabilitation and development policies that protect their resources and livelihoods.

Center for Equity Studies: Support Unit for Communal Riot Survivors, Bhagalpur, Bihar ($2942, New York): Survivors of 1989 riots engage social workers and legal advocates to confront ongoing psychological, social and economic problems.

Tribal Health Initiative: School Health Program ($7692, Boston, Boulder & Seattle), Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu: Children learn about basic health and sanitation.

Sahaja Samrudha: Indian Cotton Revival, Gadag, Dharwad and Haveri, Karnataka ($7692, San Diego): Farmers growing desi cotton will produce quality seed and strengthen processing and marketing support for their crop.

Development Research Communication & Services Center: Seed Conservation, South 24 Paraganas, West Bengal ($8231, Boston): Small and marginal farmers preserve local varieties of seeds.

A summer in Chennai

Cassie DeFillipo spent a few months in the summer of 2012 visiting AID-India's Eureka program in Tamil Nadu, and even teaching a few classes! Now a PhD student of Development at the University of Melbourne, she reflects on her experiences.

When I was 19, I read a book by an Indian author and was fascinated by her story. I decided that someday I would spend at least one month volunteering in India.

Seven years later, with the help of the Association for India's Development, I got to work in one of the sectors I care most about - education, with the Eureka Child program. I visited sites across Tamil Nadu, gathered data about rural after-school program sites, interviewed students and teachers, and then created journal stories for donors. The areas I travelled to were not areas of the country where tourists visit, so I got to learn about Indian culture and daily life.

I then went to work at a primary school in a rural community for one week, where I co-taught English courses and partnered with the school's English teacher to identify ways to strengthen the program. I stayed with the headmaster and his wife, who kindly shared their living space with me. One night, I got out all my jewelry-making supplies and taught them and the neighbour's daughter—who had become my sidekick—how to make button rings, a specialty craft I enjoy making. It was a night of fun and laughter, one we all enjoyed despite some language barriers. After my experience at the rural primary school, I returned to Chennai to build an English-language activities manual and teach in an impoverished area of Chennai.

Read the rest of Cassie's report at aidindia.org.
Would you like to work for a few months or a year with an AID partner in India? Write to intern@aidindia.org.

As we go to press, floods have wreaked havoc in Tamil Nadu. AID India volunteers in Chennai and Cuddalore are active in rescue, relief and rehabilitation.

aid One for India *Making every one count!*

Working for an India where everyone counts and every dream has a fair chance. Make your year-end tax-deductible donation to AID at oneforindia.org.

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