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BITS AND ASHA: PARTNERING TO FOSTER SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

India's most global social organization was started by an IITian and finds supporters in major cities and universities around the world. Asha has captured the imagination of many and changed the lives of many Indians. BITS and BITSians have been involved with Asha for many years, even having worked on a joint project with Yale University. This article discusses what Asha is doing at BITS

While BITS students spent many years in Pilani, few are aware of a place called Jherli. Jherli is one of the most underdeveloped Gram Panchayats in the Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan. It is comprised of three villages - Jherli, Raila and Garinda - with a total population of more than 5,000 people. The villagers make a living through farming, daily-wage labor, and by running small businesses. But, like many of the small villages in

BITS must take responsibility to help improve the educational opportunities available for children in surrounding villages," says Dr. Motilal Dash, a Professor at BITS. Dr. Dash is the current lead on the Gyanganga project, an effort to help improve the quality of primary and secondary education in the district.

While most villagers recognize the importance of educating their children, the dearth of proper school buildings and the scarcity of

environment is also visible among the village. Villagers are not only aware about general health care, but also about the hazards of eating pan masala, drinking alcohol, malnutrition, and chewing tobacco, etc.

Although the Gyanganga project was conceived in 2001, it only became a reality when initial support was received from Asha for Education, a non-profit organization dedicated to catalyzing socio-economic change in India through education. Dr. Dash exclaims, "We are so pleased to partner with an organization, such as Asha for Education, to support our efforts to create quality learning experiences for all children in the district." He continues, "With their assistance, we have been able to create and sustain a very successful project that will help improve the lives of these villagers, but also our community as a whole." A cooperative spirit is being developed between rural and urban, between educated and illiterate, and between privileged and underprivileged - opposite spectrums of society are learning from each other and cultivating change.



Rajasthan and throughout India, unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty are rampant. There is an inherent lack of accessibility to basic facilities, such as clean water and consistent electricity, and a significant need for a stronger infrastructure.

BITS Pilani, however, is taking action to help the neighboring residents. "We recognize that as a major entity in this community,

teachers are not conducive to learning. But, through the work of the Gyanganga project, Dr. Dash and fellow Bitsians are working to make changes in the community. There is now an increased awareness about the importance of a quality education for both boys and girls alike. The number of children attending school is higher and there is a lower dropout rate. The impact of health care education on cleanliness, general hygiene and the

Intrinsic in its mission, Asha strongly believes that education opens a doorway to creating socio-economic change for the long-term. Asha continues to support the Gyanganga project because of its commitment to developing income generation programs to help villagers find alternate means for wages and creating power and water resource management schemes. The project is not only providing education for over 400 children in the villages, but is also seeking to improve the way of life for the over

5,000 inhabitants of the Gram Panchayat.



Asha for Education has been an innovative supporter of projects throughout India, like the Gyanganga project in Pilani, for the past 13 years. Created by three students at U.C. Berkeley, with a passion for engendering socio-economic change in India, the organization has amassed a group of people, from all over the world, seeking to foster idealism and egalitarianism. It has become a magnet for students, young professionals, and those who simply want a chance to contribute to the betterment of the world.

Asha allows as much anonymity, or lack thereof, that anyone might desire. It allows a person with passion, vision, and a small idea to create a plan, gather supporters, and take action. Comprised only of hundreds of volunteers, Asha has been self-sustaining, efficient, and successful in raising over \$5 million in the past several years, and supporting over 400 projects all over India. It is a zero-overhead organization, which allows the organization to send 100% of donations directly to project partners. But Asha is not just a funder, it is a partner with those grass-roots organizations who are doing the daily work to make a change in their communities and in

their country. Asha creates a relationship, built on trust, friendship, and shared ideals, with project partners. Volunteers must physically visit a project site before funding will ensue, and thereafter, a steward will regularly communicate with local directors and leads to provide support, advice, most importantly, act as humble cheerleader of the incredible work they are doing everyday.

The efforts of Asha for Education can only continue to be sustained if those people with a desire to create change, in very small or even unimaginable ways, commit their passion, energy, and time. Life is constantly bringing us new challenges and obstacles, but if one has just a moment, take that moment to recognize what all of us can give back to a culture and heritage that has contributed to the foundation of our values and ideals. With no time at all, one can make a donation to Asha and be assured that every single penny will be sent

create a means to interact with people who share the same passion and who will challenge you further to dream bigger and brighter! Perhaps most meaningful, your contribution to Asha will allow you to reach out to those whom your efforts are directly affecting.

The spirit of Asha lives in its volunteers, its donors, and supporters. It is intangible, perhaps even difficult to express in words, but it arises from an inherent wish to ensure that every child receives a quality education and thus provided with the foundation to succeed. Even more so, however, the spirit of Asha lives in people like Dr. Motilal Dash and the BITS students and alumni who are taking action to help their community.

To become involved in the Asha for Education movement or to make a donation to further its efforts, please visit www.ashanet.org, or send an email to coordinator@ashanet.org.



to build a school, feed a child during school-hours, or add one more teacher to a threadbare staff. Asha chapters throughout the world provide yet another opportunity to become involved, with not only the mission of the organization, but also

To learn more about the work of Dr. Dash and his colleagues at BITS Pilani, please email him at dash@bits-pilani.ac.in. Together, we choose to make a difference in the world. !