
akshara

the newsletter of sankalp—the india literacy focus group at iowa state university

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Sankalp, as any dynamic organization, is constantly changing and taking new directions to achieve the goal set by its core philosophy – “Development and Empowerment through Education.” An important change has been the shift in focus of raising funds on a per project basis. We feel this will motivate us in raising funds efficiently as we have a specific and a tangible target to work towards. The immense success of the

editorial

Gujarat earthquake relief drive was the first implementation of this approach. Presently we are following the same approach with *Adivasi Mitra*. Another important realization has been that to achieve our goal there is a need to associate more people with Sankalp and expand the pool of active members. Most of the people who have been associated with Sankalp lose touch with the organization once they leave Iowa State. We need to make it possible for this group of committed people to continue their association with Sankalp. We are making a concerted effort in this direction by trying to reach out to these people and facilitating their active participation.

We feel that the ever-increasing ISU alumni and faculty who have made what Sankalp is today not

only have the right to know the direction Sankalp is taking but also to modulate this direction by providing their valuable insights. ‘*Akshara*’ aims to achieve this two-way exchange. Its objectives also include raising funds, increasing awareness, reporting activities and events and profiling projects we have been supporting. It also aims to serve as a platform for people to express their views and opinions. One unique aspect of *Akshara* is going to be the view from the other side, a guest article from an organization or person we have been working with.

Akshara will serve as a web connecting the committed and like-minded individuals out there to the core-working group at Iowa State. This mesh is important since the task ahead is monumental and we cannot hope to achieve our goal without working together. Let us play our part; small, it may seem individually but together we will make a difference. Let us join hands to turn this endeavor into a movement, if not a social revolution.

Support us in changing the face of India through education. Yes, we can change things—one step at a time. Your support is invaluable to a lot of people who are banking on it.

Neeraj and Rahul
Editors-in-Chief

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looking back: looking ahead

Attempts to predict the future have been rather futile and fairly inconsistent what with limitations to understanding the verses of Nostradamus; or worse yet, people's interpretation of his verses. While the art of prediction is yet to be perfected, it is not hard to identify specific actions that have determined the course of events to follow. The Quit India movement is a case in point, as is Mikhail Gorbachev's call for *perestroika*; Oracles the Mahatma and Gorbachev were not – else each might have seen the Partition coming or that of a splintered USSR, respectively; leaders with a vision they were, who inspired and led people to action. So, in the comfort of our armchairs while we can debate about predictions of the Indian subcontinent comprising of 50 warring nations, or that of attaining the status of an economic and industrial superpower in the next century, what actually happens is entirely up to each one of us.

With a founding belief in the value of action rather than prophecy, a group of students took part in an informal discussion on identifying several ways to influence positive change in India in the summer of '95. This discussion eventually led to the formation of the India Literacy Focus group, which soon attained campus organization status at ISU and was rechristened "Sankalp." The name embodies our commitment to make a difference in the lives of at least a few of the millions of less fortunate Indians affected by 'poverty and ignorance and disease and the inequality of opportunity'- the ending of which Jawaharlal Nehru had identified fifty years ago as the task ahead of the nation. This task, as we are well aware, remains far from accomplished.

Over the past six years (1995-2001) we at Sankalp have attempted to increase awareness in the Ames community about the problem of illiteracy in India, through posters, fliers and through participation in community-wide events like Veishea. A major portion of our time and resources has been devoted to the solicitation of project proposals for education and socio-economic development from non-governmental organizations in India. After careful review based on several criteria, a total of 9 projects have been provided with financial support (a total of \$20,000), funds for which have been raised from penny collection, can redemption, sale of greeting cards, handicrafts and music CDs, voluntary contributions, and occasional collaborations with other organizations

in the United States. Sankalpites have also taken advantage of different opportunities—like the AID conference in Boston, and the RIM conference in Ganges, MI – to understand the issue of socio-economic development on a broader scale.

While it may be difficult to conceive how these accomplishments of ours can have far-reaching consequences, by no means are they insignificant. We firmly believe in "The Starfish Story" (adapted from the book *The Star Thrower* by Loren C. Eiseley), and encourage you to be inspired by it as well:

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work. One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so, he walked faster to catch up. As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean. He came closer still and called out "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?" The young man paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean." "I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" asked the somewhat startled wise man. The young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die." Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, "But, young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!" The young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, "It made a difference for that one."

perspective

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Rural Development in India: The Policy-People Chasm

Overall development is the sum total of the efforts of all concerned — the government, the NGOs and the individual. It is imperative that everyone should play their role effectively, with real concern — it is only then the fruits are expected to be rewarding.

Primarily the Ministry of Rural Development and **CAPART** (Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology) is responsible for earmarking and channeling the funds for developmental activities. There is a very strong feeling that only a portion of the allocated funds actually goes toward developmental activities as such — with a major chunk going merely for administrative purposes and another portion getting siphoned away.

Today, governmental efforts are complemented by those of NGOs, which have come into being owing to the concern and commitment of well-meaning citizens. Humans as we are — having the share of good and bad as well — it is but natural that we have good NGOs and not-so-good NGOs. The efforts of the 'good' NGOs are leading to "develop and field test" excellent and meaningful projects. This helps in giving the government a proper insight, perspective, and direction in drafting and implementation of projects at a national level. Most of the NGOs, though they may have a committed cadre of people to implement projects (which they develop with close interaction with the people at the grassroots and taking note of their felt needs), are bogged down for lack of funds. Though the government has funds for such projects, the flow of the funds is either impeded or is untimely, making the efforts fruitless.

The government has planned many-a-project for the welfare and economic development of the people in the villages. Most of the funds flow through the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) with a project director (with the District Collector as the Chairman of the project) at the district level. Unfortunately the people for whom they are meant are ignorant about most such projects, and when they are aware of them, do not know how to get take advantage of such

projects. This gap in communication needs to be filled. It is here that motivated people have a very meaningful role to play, in making the targeted public aware of the projects that are available for their welfare, and then act as a liaison between them and the governmental agencies. This band of committed people needs to be supported and trained. It is here that funding agencies and well-meaning philanthropists have a very effective role to play. It is extremely heartening to see many of our countrymen and women — those who have come to this far off land to show their true mettle and make a mark, and the youngsters who have come to enrich themselves with higher education—continue to show their concern for the well-being of the people back at home and contributing their mite in this direction.

One need never feel that he/she is too small to play a role in the development of the country. It is only the sum-total of the efforts of all the individuals that make the country move forward. It is therefore, imperative that each and every individual play his or her role effectively. I complement the efforts of SANKALP and similar organizations that are tirelessly making efforts to mobilize individual concerns into community action. It is indeed heartening to see the concern of these youngsters for the well-being of the people back home and for the progress of the nation!

from the other side

About the Author:

Sri. Bhagavatula V. SrinivasaRao has worked with several rural development projects for well over 25 years. He has been instrumental in mobilizing rural youth into action groups for various literacy, thrift, and health programs. He is the chief-of-liaison for the venerable Bhagavatula Charitable Trust (BCT) and has held that position for almost 2 decades. He can be reached via email at: vsrbtula@yahoo.com

Association : Action : Achievement

Since our inception in 1995, we at Sankalp have raised over \$20,000 to date and funded nine projects. Following is a brief report of the projects we have funded.

One of the first projects we supported was a satellite school of the **Rishi Valley Rural Education Program** in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh during 1996-1997. The satellite schools were constructed with the help of the community and used to provide free education to the children of the neighborhood and also as a resource center for the adults.

Another project that we partly funded in association with **Alternative for India Development** and **India Development Service** during 1996-1997 was to provide non-formal education to the tribal community and dalits for their overall development in the West Singhbhum district of Bihar.

Marr-Munning Ashram, with their involvement in the Bhoodan movement in the Gramdan villages of Koraput district of Orissa, started their social developmental efforts for improving health, sanitation, education and other rural reconstruction projects. Sankalp, during 1997-1998 funded one of their projects to carry out a survey and a literacy campaign to mobilize the mostly illiterate population of four villages in the district. Upon receiving a positive report from the visit to the project by Raju Kakani, a founding member of Sankalp, funds were released in 1999-2000 to impart primary education to the children, functional literacy to the adults and general awareness concerning overall development.

Inner Wheel Club of Bangalore North adopted a village named Palanahalli near Bangalore providing the people with education, medical facilities and community services. We funded the library facilities and mid-day meal program for the children in the primary school of Palanahalli during 1998-1999. The mid-day meal program facilitated the increase in the strength of the school from 80 to 130 in one year. This program has been supported from 1999 to 2001.

Sankalp supported the educational component of a CRY (Child Relief and You) project, **Saikripa**, for 1999-2000. Saikripa's objective is to provide parental love, food, education and a life of dignity to homeless children and has an orphanage, Balkutir, and a school, Sai Shiksha Santhan, with 25 children near Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

We acted as a liaison, and funds were channeled through Sankalp to support a school for special children run by **Gnana Deepam Charitable Trust** in Pammal, Madras. There are 32 special children belonging to low income families being trained by the school. They also undertake support, counseling and guidance to parents and families of the special children.

Social Health Education Development Society (SHEDS) undertook an urban slum education program near Jatni in Khurda district of Orissa. The objective of the project

was to target school dropouts and reduce the dropout rate. This was achieved by creating awareness in the community and providing education and vocational training to the children. Sankalp supported the project during 1999-2000. Currently this project has been taken over by the local municipality.

Owing to limited resources, we have restricted ourselves to literacy projects in the past. Our experiences and that of other organizations have made us realize that the projects would be more successful if the emphasis is on overall development through the involvement of the community. This would ensure the sustainability of the developmental process even after the project is completed. In this spirit of involving the community through stimulated volunteerism, we funded **Center for Action in Rural Development (CARD)** through the Bhagavatula Charitable Trust in 1999-2000. The objective of the project is to support dedicated volunteers to spread awareness and involve the people of Polaki in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh, and become self-reliant in the cause of their own development.

In the first week of February 2001, Sankalp coordinated a fundraiser to support the **earthquake relief** work in Gujarat. We had targeted to raise \$5000 from the community in Ames and were successful in raising over \$7500. An amount of \$3250 was disbursed to SHEDS for short-term relief in inaccessible areas in Surendranagar and Jamnagar districts of Gujarat. The remaining money will be released for medium and long-term relief in the near future.

Currently we are raising funds for a project in two tribal villages in Vizag district of Andhra Pradesh.

Adivasi Mitra, an NGO in the area, has been involved with these villages in making them self-sustained and has requested funds for a project aimed at community mobilization and involvement and providing education to the 40 children of the two villages. A flier with detailed information on this project is enclosed.

Projects funded so far:

Project NGO	Amount disbursed
Rishi Valley Rural Education Program	\$1000.00
Alternative for India Development	\$1000.00
Marr-Munning Ashram	\$4500.00
Inner Wheel Club	\$3000.00
Saikripa	\$1000.00
Gnana Deepam Charitable Trust	\$600.00
SHEDS	\$905.00
CARD	\$1000.00
SHEDS - Earthquake Relief	\$3250.00

track record

At the grass roots with SHEDS

SHEDS (Social Health Education Development Society) is a voluntary developmental agency based in Jatni, Orissa. It was established in 1987 by a group of four students studying in their eighth grade. These remarkable kids who were active in the school scouts movement pooled in 75 rupees to start SHEDS. Today, SHEDS is involved in developmental activities all over Orissa. It has made remarkable progress in the areas of health and education.

Sankalp's involvement with SHEDS started in the middle of 1999 when a request was made by SHEDS for undertaking an initiative to provide education in the urban slums of Jatni Municipality that have a low literacy rate and are also the breeding grounds for antisocial activities. SHEDS, in a survey conducted in collaboration with the local municipality, found that the low literacy rate and education standards had a lot to do with the exploitation of children rampant in the area. Sankalp decided to fund the project titled "Urban Slum Education Program" which had two specific objectives: (1) To provide education to all illiterate and school dropouts up to the age group of 14 years. (2) To provide awareness camps to slum people.

The project was spread over six centers and had an initial enrolment of 302 children. But the devastating Orissa cyclone hampered the ongoing process. Nevertheless the resolve of SHEDS was evident in the way the project was revived and brought back to its initial stages inside of a few months after the Orissa cyclone. Sankalp made an initial contribution of approximately Rs. 45,000 towards this cause. Recently the local municipality has decided to take over the operations of this program. SHEDS has shifted their operations to some highly demanding rural areas to avoid duplication.

In October 2000, Sarat Chandra Patnaik, the CEO of SHEDS visited Ames. It was part of a large-scale fund-raising trip to the United States sponsored mostly by Concern, Ireland. Sarat explained the philosophy and current activities of SHEDS. He also gave an account of the cyclone relief activities. We were impressed not only by the relief work undertaken but also the planning and research that went into reducing the impact of such natural calamities in the future. Owing to the experience of SHEDS and other Orissa based

organizations had in dealing with natural disasters, they were called upon to serve in Gujarat when the disastrous earthquake struck the state. Sankalp decided to fund SHEDS to undertake relief work in the earthquake affected regions. An amount of \$3250 —was dispatched as a first installment. In the initial stages they used our funds to distribute essential things like blankets, tarpaulin, mats, kitchen sets etc to six badly hit villages. They have also adopted two villages and are involved in reconstruction work.

In May 2001, Surya Prakash Loonker, ex-project coordinator of Sankalp visited Bhubaneswar and Jatni in Orissa. According to him SHEDS works with the poorest of the poor in Orissa. Here is a very encouraging report from him.

"I was with SHEDS for two days. I met Sarat Patnaik, CEO of SHEDS, Krishna Patnaik, and several of their staff members. SHEDS has its main office in Jatni and has a couple of offices in Bhubaneswar. I had a chance to interact with around 15-20 staff members and all are very dedicated and happy to be with SHEDS. I found SHEDS to be very efficient and effective. They maintain accounts well and their books are audited and open to donors. Dedication and commitment are evident in action at SHEDS. They work very closely with villagers and take the entire village into confidence and involve villagers in all their activities. I found it to be a true grass roots level organization. They have done substantial work and made a lot of progress in their area. Now they are expanding all over Orissa.

Of the six schools SHEDS has built in six different villages, I went on field trips to three of them. I found them really good. To visit one school I had to walk 2 kms through dense forests. This single-room school typically caters to a population of 40-100 families in each village.

I visited their self-employment programs—the coir rope centre, nursery, goaterly and dairy farm. These are doing well and providing employment to poor people to enable the survival of their family. I was impressed with these centers as they result in solving several problems such as health, education, living, and awareness, and are also a very good sustainable

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up close & personal

looking back/SHEDS

(continued from page 2)

Few of us are content with the way things are in India. In fact, we often complain vociferously about the atrocious levels of corruption, and about how the "system" never works – be it a response to a devastating cyclone, a train accident, or a war with our friendly neighbors. How can WE change the "system"? Possibly by stimulating a revolution that has a strong foundation at the grassroots – our nation's villages and towns – where basic needs like primary health care, education and sanitation are lacking. In order for this revolution to materialize, "critical mass" is essential. By acting as catalysts, we hope to provide strength and support to projects aimed at literacy and developmental issues, and also to stimulate volunteerism (see www.indiamovement.org). Dreze and Sen in their book (Ref.1) have indicated that "...actions of the public can be of profound significance to the successes and failures of economic and social change in general, and to development efforts in particular."

perspective

Sankalp asks of each of you to get involved in one or more of the following ways: (1) Make financial contributions to projects (2) Help in project identification and appraisal (3) Assist in obtaining feedback on project progress, and (4) Support us by creating a network of like-minded people and organizations.

You can be an effective and positive influence in the process of development in India. By your participation you can provide hope to the deprived and neglected millions such that we can *truly* redeem the pledge to "end poverty, disease, ignorance, and the inequality of opportunity," Nehru made over half a century ago.

Further reading:

1. *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen.
2. *Small is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher, Harper and Row
3. *Rejuvenate India Movement: www.indiamovement.org*
4. *Association for India's Development: www.aid.org*
5. *ASHA for Education: An Action Group for Basic Education in India: www.ashanet.org*

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development models. SHEDS is increasing its activities in sustainable development and wants to generate more than 60% of their funds through these activities and raise the remaining through donations.

I had a chance to visit a health sub center. They took over this place from the government and are running it themselves. The government is not even supporting them with medicines. They serve 7500 people in about 12 villages through this health sub center. Their operations are meticulous and thorough, and this has helped improve health care in all the nearby villages.

I visited the school where they undertook reconstruction after the Orissa cyclone. They have rebuilt some rooms and the school is back to normalcy. SHEDS runs a large school in Jatni where they have the current SHEDS office. The school is run effectively and is attended by around 650 students. They have recently bought land a few kilometers away to build a larger school and cater to more students. They are looking for funds to build this new school. The current school will be converted into a new SHEDS office, as they need much more space for SHEDS operations now. The land where the current SHEDS office and school stands was donated to SHEDS by Sarat's parents.

They have obtained land from one village to open a natural medicine based hospital. They are looking for funds to build the hospital. It will serve several surrounding villages. I visited their partner NGOs and also their offices in Bhubaneswar.

Overall, I found it to be an excellent organization. I would recommend SHEDS for more funding from Sankalp in the coming years. It is money well spent for social development in India. It is one of the very few good NGOs in Orissa, doing a commendable job and influencing the lives of several people in rural areas."

Non-governmental organizations like SHEDS combined with governmental programs can make a difference in the future of our nation. When four school children got together to start a organization, they probably did not dream of making such an impact on the lives of so many people. Let us continue supporting such great initiatives in every which way we can.

up close & personal

Events and Activities:

Mr. Sarat Chandra Patnaik from SHEDS visited Ames and gave a presentation on SHEDS—activities and progress.

Mr. Srinivas Rao from Bhagavatula Charitable Trust (BCT) paid a visit to Ames. He shared his experiences with BCT, their current projects, and what Sankalp could do to make a difference.

Sankalp collected nearly \$7,500 towards Earthquake Relief in Gujarat. Around \$3,250 has been disbursed to SHEDS for immediate relief, and the remaining will be released for medium- and long-term relief.

Stomping Grounds has been anointed as the new venue for Sankalp’s meetings and this has boosted membership (not to mention coffee sales) in Ames. The drab 1134 Sweeney is now reserved for emergencies.

The members of Sankalp organized a picnic at Ledges State Park. We had a lot of fun, playing volleyball, cricket and soccer. Narayan also organized a quiz which saw the ‘Jeopardy’ team emerging as the winner.

A campaign to raise money from the alumni, faculty and community for the Adivasi Mitra Project is underway. We hope the alumni will open their hearts and purse strings towards this deserving cause.

People: Who did what?

Dr. Ravikant: Well, he *kan*. And he did. He graduated. With a PhD. Now, the chief honcho has an axe to grind with corporate America, and Corning-ware, beware.

Narayan(a.k.a DNA): We are stuck with our DNA. After spending a year at NYC, where the airs didn’t quite agree with him, DNA is back at ISU to complete his thesis. After which he plans to visit Madison to do a PhD, which will raise him to the nth degree.

Anil: The current president is going to graduate soon too, and will soon be leaving Sankalp in an unprecedented

situation.

Neeraj: Is on the go in Chicago where Teradyne will be paying him to carry on Sankalp’s activities. Neeraj has promised to remain a selfless Sankalpite , and start a Chicago chapter soon.

Mayuresh: The capable web maestro and tech maestro will be going to Boston, where he will go round to EMC2. He will then use all the technology available to him to better Sankalp’s webpage.

Abu: Will soon be declared the most eligible bachelor in Ames, continues his conquests, both on field and off-field.

Mamatha: Continued her fine work with Sankalp, winning quizzes along the way. In collaboration with Narayan, she plans to raise money for Sankalp via quizzes.

Sandhya: Will be in Brookhaven for the next six months, playing with electrons and protons.

And who joined?

Rahul, a quiet, nice, soft spoken guy who has promised to devote his next 2 years to Sankalp.

Ganesh, the president of Sitar, will be pulling strings for Sankalp.

Venkat, in between conferences and internships will burn the midnight oil for Sankalp.

Kamal, a deceptive soul is taking over as the treasurer, a decidedly frightening prospect!

Murali, who wrote these snippets late one night, was suddenly faced with the frightening discovery that snippets when reversed reads steppins. He promises to stepin and investigate this fully before sleep claims him.

Also, we need more people to join Sankalp, since most of the big brass is migrating soon. Please donate your time to Sankalp and we assure you you’ll feel forever rewarded.

s n i p p e t s

Please provide us with your contact information. This will only be for our internal database and will not be shared with any outside parties.

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

e-mail _____

Please provide your comments/feedback in this space. (Please use an additional sheet, if necessary.)

We hope you enjoyed this edition of the newsletter. Each copy cost \$1.46 including printing and mailing, and your feedback will be further proof for us that this was money well-spent.

