



## Spotlight: Asha Fellow Siddamma

Siddamma is a grassroots activist and an educator working with the marginalized Irula Tribals for the last 12 years. Knowing how it felt to belong to a marginalized section of the society was an early lesson for Siddamma after she was brutally attacked as a child by a bear. Though she managed to survive after 20 days in coma she had many facial and shoulder scars. As a young girl she had to suffer much discrimination and ridicule, but her mother did not let her quit school encouraging her to work even harder. Her experience made her determined to stand by those who were marginalized and gave her faith in education as an empowering tool.

In '93 as a young sociologist and educator for slum children she was exposed to the plight of the slum women who were suffering inequality, oppression and extortion and she stood up for their rights. This eventually let her to create Bharathi Trust (named in honor of Bharathiyaar, a poet and freedom fighter, who believed in equality and empowerment of all). Her work then took her among the Irula tribals.

The trust is now a people's movement covering over 50,000 people in four districts of Tamil Nadu. While there have been several provisions of employment available by the government for tribals, like the Irulas (ST), these were beyond the reach of the Irula children most of who did not go to school. They were first generation learners with little access to schools. But, beyond that even when they had access to schools, the children were discriminated against since the Irulas were not considered fit to be part of the mainstream.

Siddamma started motivational centers; places that made learning fun and using activity-based learning rekindled the joy of learning and instilled confidence in children. In three years the motivational centers integrate the children into the mainstream schools and continue to function as additional help centers for a couple of more years. Asha for Education partnered with Siddamma in this effort and over the last five years has supported 8 centers that are now in different stages of the above cycle. The first of these is ready to be closed, since there is no need for it anymore.

But not all that efforts are directed towards hope for a better tomorrow. Bharathi Trust also helps villagers organize themselves to represent themselves better in their struggle for basic rights. The initial effort was merely to receive minimum wages. It is not enough for small groups to stand for their rights but for the whole community to stand together. This was the birth of the Sarpam. Each

village elects 5 members to the Sarpam who are accountable to their village. They do not represent any formal position in the government only bring all the Irula communities together to understand each others problems, learn from each other and stand by each other in their time of need. Bharathi Trust provided the leadership training and helped in creation of this transparent institution that truly represents the people. In getting organized many communities have been able to get their basic rights and villages have been transformed.

The transformation is most visible in the release of bonded laborers from the rice mills of Red Hills (just 30 km from Chennai). Last year there were 800 rice mills in this area with an estimated 10,000 Irula tribals who were bonded laborers. A mill was a closed fortress and only those who work in a mill were allowed in and all members of a family were never allowed to leave the mill at the same time. The entire family worked at the mill the men and women did hard manual labor 19 hrs a day and the children and the elderly were responsible for cleaning the mills. Three generations of families were working in these mills. A laborer was paid Rs. 13/day (minimum wages are Rs. 89/day) and this was defended as being legal since the mill owners were providing accommodation. The exploitation reached its apex when a woman was asked to work immediately after she gave birth to a child and she died of exhaustion. This led to some of the laborers escaping from the mills and seeing refuge with the Sarpam. The Sarpam had been investigating the living conditions in the rice mills indirectly by speaking to these workers when some came out of the mills. The mill owners reported the escape to the police who came to take these people back to the mills under the context of having to repay loans that the workers owed the owners. The workers are not provided any health insurance and if anyone falls ill the owner forwards a loan to pay for the medical expenses at a very high interest that builds up to a large amount in a very small time. This was the main reason most of the laborers were caught in the cycle of bonded labor. The local police and administration rejected the claim that they were bonded laborers and insisted that they pay the "loans" if they did not want to go back. This started the legal battle in court and the Sarpam's struggle to bring the burning issue to spotlight. Their struggle was joined in by the NAPM (National Alliance of People's Movements) and the International Women's Organization. Together they finally brought the issue to be discussed in the parliament. There have been many changes since then, the most brutal of owners were jailed and around 800 laborers have been released with a small package from the

government. Many mills are now paying minimum wages and the Sarpam have been provided with passes to be able to enter any mill, examine and document the living conditions. Asha is again contributing its bit in supporting a school for the children of the released bonded laborers. For all her efforts Siddamma was awarded the Speak-Out award from outlook magazine.

Siddamma's most recent effort is in the creation of a village resource center. This center would not only help communities experiment with different modes of livelihood in primary production, but also provide a building ground to teach kids who have dropped out of the conventional system of education and make them self-reliant.

Asha Fellowships are provided to individuals who have a great potential to create social change and need support for their basic sustenance. Asha-Austin is proud to support Siddamma in her efforts towards a just society.

To learn more about Siddamma and her efforts please visit: <http://www.ashanet.org/austin/projects/siddamma.html>.

– Sanjeev Ranganathan

### ”Rang”: A celebration of Indian Cinema

Asha Austin inaugurated its planned bi-annual film fest in April. Six breathtaking movies were screened over a span of two weeks from 5 different regional languages Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Kannada and English. The event was organized at the University of Texas Austin campus and enjoyed a very good turnout. The event began with the screening of *Swades*, a runaway hit of 2004, starring Shahrukh Khan and musical score by AR Rahman. The film, inspired by an AID activist, shows a young NASA scientist who decides to return to his home country to help his home village community solve its own problems. The movie enjoyed a pretty good turn out and set the stage for the others to follow.

It was followed by the Tamil classic *Unnal Mudiyum Thambi* starring Kamal Hassan inspired by the life story of Dr. M. S. Udhayamurthy of Makkal Sakthi Eiyakkam and Oscar nominated Marathi movie *Shwas*. Both the movies enjoyed a great attendance. It would be good to mention here the applause from the audience after the end of *Shwas*. Mira Nair movie *Salaam Bombay*, Kannada Movie *Chiguridha Kanasu* and the documentary *The day my god died* were screened on the second week and each of the movies was highly appreciated by the audience.

Asha volunteers had arranged a small five-minute presentation of the projects that the chapter was involved in. The volunteers at the end of the movie got involved in discussions with the audience and answered questions from the audience related to the projects. All the movies screened were free of charge and the volunteers had arranged free snacks and refreshments. If you happened to miss out, don't worry; Asha will be organizing ”Rang” once again very soon in December/January. Do check out <http://www.ashanet.org/austin> for details.

The past year has been eventful for Asha Austin. In the few years of its existence the chapter saw unprecedented growth in 2004-05. The chapter strength in terms of active volunteers has more than doubled in the last year. In all around \$50,000 was raised in 2005 alone. From being a satellite chapter, co-coordinating four projects in 2004, Asha Austin has come a long way in supporting nine projects from five states.

The innovative marathon program called 'Strides Of Hope' was launched in September of 2004. This along with the long standing 'Support a Child' program has raised most of the funds for the chapter. Asha Austin also set a precedent with the 'Support a Teacher' program that was launched last year. The volunteers also organized 'Play 'N' Help', a kids' fair to raise funds for the chapter's projects. The diligence, commitment and patience of the volunteers have been instrumental in the success of these initiatives.

The fundraising was not done without a goal in sight. The chapter is committed to the selfless work undertaken by our project partners. The belief in our partners and the change they bring about in the communities they interact with, inspired us to support them to the best of our abilities. Here is a brief description of how the funds raised by us are used for the underprivileged we strive for.

Asha supports recurring expenses and is also looking into development of school infrastructure at Asha Sikshan Sansthan in Reoti village of Ballia district in Uttar Pradesh. We funded a tailoring unit as part of our support for vocational training streams for the mentally challenged destitute women at Banyan, in Chennai, Tamilnadu. The training is not only therapeutic but also provides an opportunity for them to work their way back into society. We supported the Bharatiya Jan Seva Ashram located in the village of Badalpur in the district of Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh. The school aims to sustain free primary education, books and clothes for children. The school also hopes to generate an interest in children for higher education and to convince their parents to send them to school.

Asha Austin approved a fellowship for Siddamma in the last year. Siddamma is a grassroots volunteer in India who works to provide a life of dignity for the Irula Tribals. Her work with the communities includes freeing bonded laborers, organizing the communities into cooperatives and mainstreaming the children into the education system by providing motivational educational centers. The chapter also approved funds for Gramin Shiksha Kendra. GSK runs an alternative school in a village near Sawai Madhopur (Rajasthan) and provides meaningful and quality education to 100 children. Beyond running model schools the organization will work with the communities and instill the demand and help with the monitoring of quality education in all local schools.

Our chapter supported Prasanna Jyothi located in Bangalore, Karnataka. Prasanna Jyothi is a home for disadvantaged and orphaned girl children. The project takes care of the boarding and education of these children. We

also raised funds to realize the long-standing dream of the children of Seva Chakkara Samajam of having their own permanent home. Seva Chakkara Samajam is an Orphanage that houses 99 children and is located in the heart of Chennai. Srishti Special Academy is a non-profit organization, headed by a team of trained, qualified and experienced special educators who feel the need today is to provide quality services and well designed and structured intervention programs to children with mental retardation, autism or any other intellectual impairment. Asha Austin hopes to provide able support for their structured intervention programs. Finally, Asha Austin successfully supported Raja Shivaji Vidyalyaya in raising funds for building a laboratory for the school, located at Sawantwadi, in Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra.

Asha Austin is currently discussing new proposals and we are looking for a more eventful year in 2005- 2006. We hope to reach out to more lives as we set upon a new year.

#### **Funds Raised:**

SAC (Support a Child) program, Marathon, SAT (Support a Teacher) program, Matching/giving funds from companies, Play 'N' Help, General donations contributed a total of **\$49,949**

#### **Funds Disbursed in 2005:**

Seva Chakkara Samajam	\$10,600.00
Bodh Shiksha Samithi (GSK)	\$6,131.87
Shristi Special Academy	\$3,600.00
Asha Sikshan Sansthan	\$3,100.00
Bharatiya Jan Seva Ashram	\$2,225.00
Prasanna Trust	\$2,160.00
Prasanna Trust	\$2,040.00
The Banyan	\$1,400.00
Bharati Trust	\$1,350.00
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$35,357</b>

**Note:** The disbursement does not include planned/committed funds for the rest of the year in 2005.

### **Shristi Special Academy**

This story is about a little girl named Deepthi.

An active and alert seven-year-old, Deepthi loves solving puzzles and playing with her friends. Like any other seven year old, she loves being the center of attraction in her class and takes a leading role in participating and initiating activities in her peer group. What you will find remarkable is the change the past few years have brought about in her.

A history of birth asphyxia and seizures had left Deepthi weak and small for her age. Delayed development milestones meant that she was unable to chew or swallow - she was on milk even at the age of three. A history of hyper ammonia syndrome resulted in a very monotonous diet, which further contributed to her weakness. She couldn't walk or talk or localize visually. Her future looked bleak at best.

This was when her parents brought her to Shristi, in November 1998.

Shristi is a non-profit society, established in 1995

by three special educators with a vision to reach out to individuals with special needs. With unique programmes designed to enable independence among the Mentally Challenged, Developmentally Delayed and those with Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Shristi reaches out to all age groups. It remains among the few institutions, which caters to infants and even the severely retarded across urban and rural communities.

The rehabilitation of those coming to Shristi includes therapeutic intervention with a focus on special education, sensory stimulation, physiotherapy and language stimulation. Through an intensive, individualized and child-focused training program, Shristi has enabled many young children with developmental delays to go to normal schools, setting them on the path towards a more normal life. Several older individuals have gained employment enabling life-changing happiness.

Deepthi joined on one such special Early Intervention programme in November 1998. The primary goal of her programme was to ensure better nutrition and feeding practices, as this was the major problem faced by her mother. Special emphasis was also given to helping her catch up with her motor milestones, primary among them being walking.

Today at 7 years, although she still has seizures, which are controlled by medication, she has learned to walk, communicates through single words and gestures and takes part in all activities of the class. She eats with minimal help under supervision and is on a toilet schedule to help streamline her bladder movements and achieve better levels of normalcy. She is receiving occupational therapy for her hand functions and through speech therapy will achieve better levels of communication.

Asha Austin's program makes it possible for an individual to sponsor partial or full cost of supporting one teacher at Shristi Special Academy. The teachers at Shristi are special educators trained to work with mentally challenged and autistic children. We believe retaining educators in the system is the way to sustain education, particularly in the context of special education. Committed though they are, supporting these educators financially is a necessary part of retaining them within the system. One can become a sponsor for a teacher at Shristi for as little as \$20 a month.

More details about Asha's support with Shristi can be found at <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=602>

– Vinod Viswanath

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*Asha for Education's goal is to catalyze socio-economic change in India through education of underprivileged children.*

**95% of Asha funds come from individuals like you. Please donate generously.**

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